FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

SEPT. 25c

featuring:

A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER

a novel by

HENRY KUTTNER

ANC

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most

REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

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Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage

FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use Spot **REDUCER** with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

PLUG IN— GRASP HANDLE AND APPLY

Take pounds off — keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!

Don't Stay FAT — You Can Lose POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY

Without Risking HEALTH

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Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

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SPOT REDUCER CO., Dept. B-128
1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

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Address .....

City ..... *State* .....

☐ SAVE POSTAGE — check here if you enclose $9.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Same money back guarantee applies. ☐ I enclose $12.98. Send DeLuxe Model.

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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

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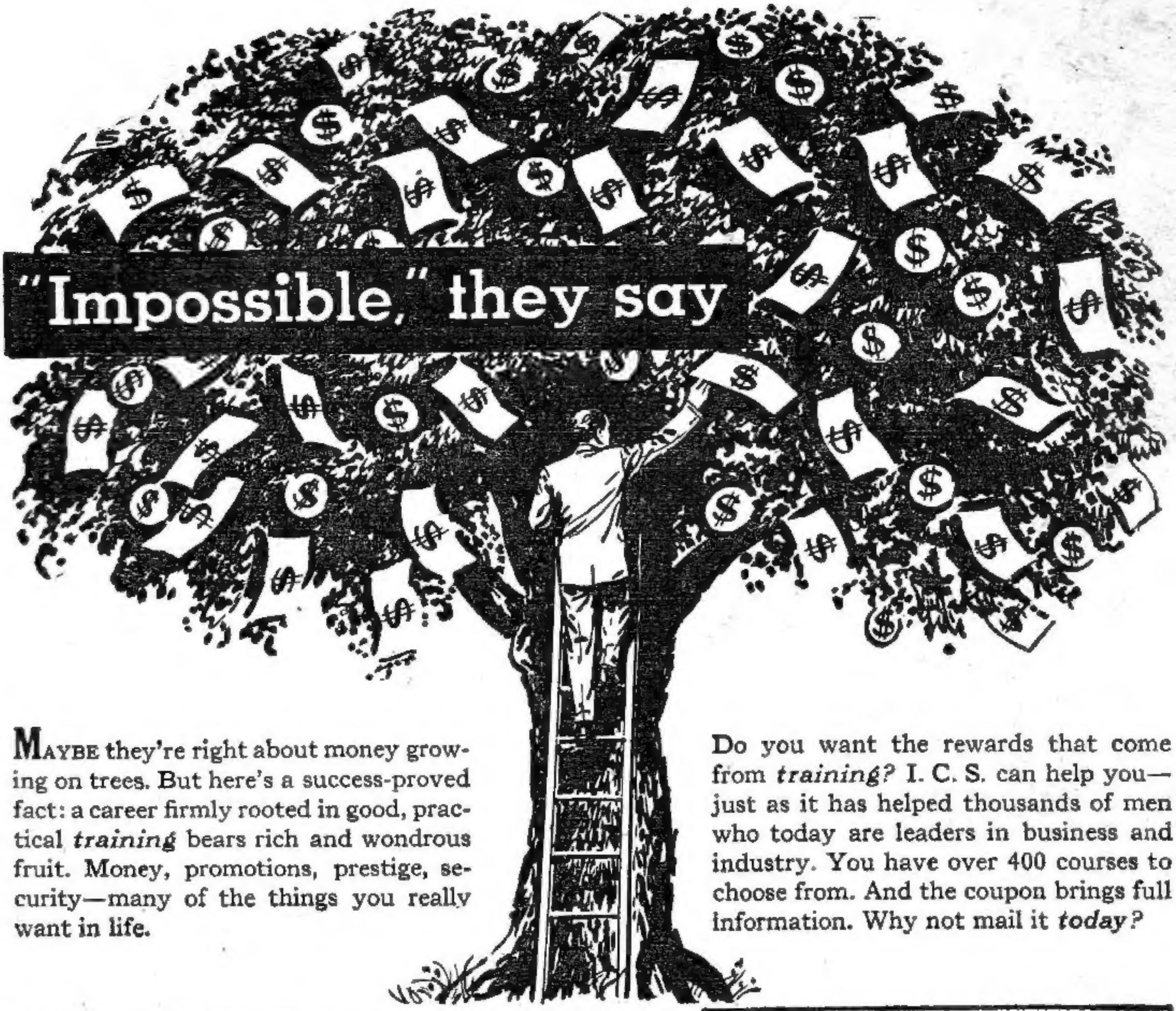

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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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VOL. 4, NO. 2
FALL, 1952

A Book-Length Science Fiction Classic

A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER . . . . **HENRY KUTTNER** **10**
Through eons of Time came Ardath of Kyrla, mobilizing the best intellects of mankind—in order to create a new civilization!

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N. L. PINES, *Publisher;* FANNY ELLSWORTH, *Managing Editor*
ED ROFHEART, *Art Director;* SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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Build a Fine Business...Full or Spare Time!

I'll Put a "Shoe Store Business" in Your Pocket!

You Don't Invest a Cent!
I Furnish Everything FREE!

Want to have lots of money in your pocket — always? Then rush the coupon below and start toward your own business. In many ways it's better than a retail store of your own! I plan to give it to you absolutely FREE. You don't invest a penny now or ever! Be in this highly profitable business QUICK.

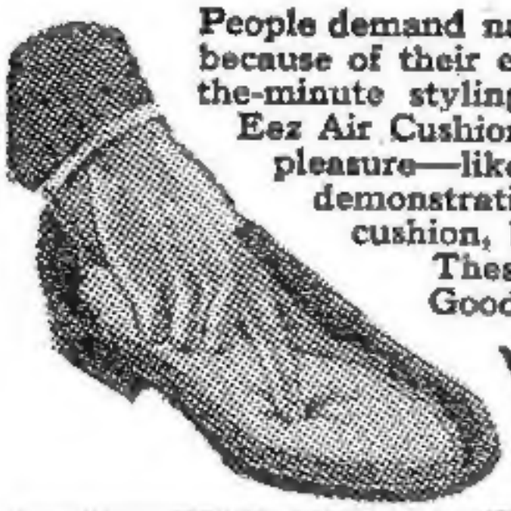
HERE'S WHY IT'S BETTER!

As the direct factory man handling the quick-selling line of this 47-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

It's easy to fit folks in the exact style they want—no need to substitute—you draw on our huge factory stock of over 175,000 pairs plus huge daily factory production.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from $5 to $10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES



People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.

Velvet-eez

BIG, STEADY PROFITS FOR YOU — NO OVERHEAD!

That's right! You have all the advantages of a profitable shoe store business without the expenses of rent, light, heat, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! No wonder Mason men are making more money than ever before. Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

No Experience Needed... Make Money First Hour!

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 151 styles of smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, barbers, waitresses, nurses, housewives — everybody! Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes easy to sell.

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SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager
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Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE and postpaid your Powerful Selling Outfit — so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

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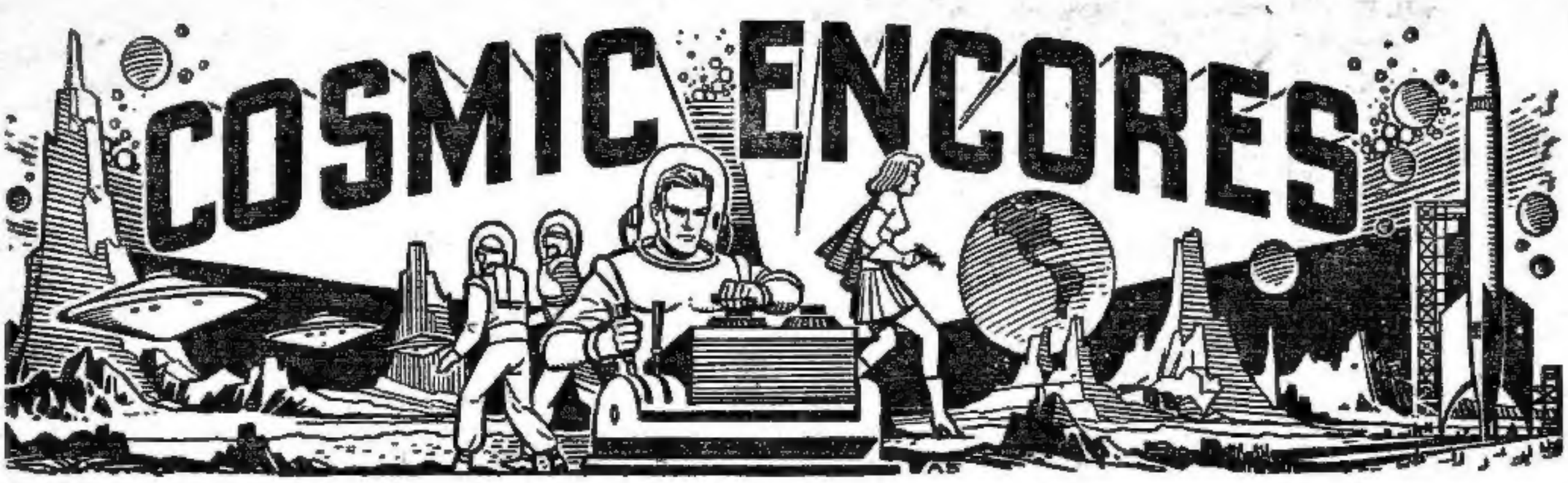

A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

THE next issue of FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE will appear in two months instead of three. This change from quarterly to bi-monthly reflects our steady rise in circulation and underlines our expressed policy of bringing you great science fiction novels you may have missed.

If you are new to science fiction this will help fill in your background by introducing you to the classics of a recent yesterday. If you are an old hand you'll want these issues, with their fine new illustrations, for your collection or for the sheer pleasure of re-reading them.

Our own sources for stories are tremendous, but in addition we have not hesitated to step outside and pick up a good story, like SLAN, published in the Summer issue. This policy will be continued without favoring any particular source except that which offers the best story at a given time.

Stories Old and New

There is also something of a controversy raging at the moment among readers as to the proper vintage for a story's selection. A vociferous group of stalwarts has been maintaining, with hammer and tongs, that the old stories are better than the modern. Our files go clear back to Gernsback days when science fiction, as we now recognize it, was just getting started. And the adherents of the old continue to clamor for the Gernsback stories, sending us lists of titles they would like to see printed.

To follow this procedure would make life very simple for the editorial staff. A huge amount of reading, evaluating and considering could be eliminated, or slashed to the bone. But to us the problem is not that simple. The mere fact that a story is old does not automatically make it a classic. Over and over again we have had the experience of going back to read a book or story which we remembered with reverence, only to be disappointed and amazed at the changes time had made. Science has moved, the times have changed, our standards are different, our sophistication of a different order. The things which were terrific once are mild today.

Once upon a time a science-fiction story was exciting if the hero merely built a space vessel and took off for the moon. The thought itself was so novel and provocative that it carried the whole story. Who needed plot, characterization, dialogue, good writing? The story flew on its rocket jets. But today rockets are not quite so new. The idea of flying to the moon is no longer so revolutionary. A story which offers this and nothing more falls flat. And too many of the real old-time yarns have this trouble.

So the editors of FSM have refused, despite some very persuasive talkers amongst the fans, to limit themselves. We have no prejudices against stories merely because of their age. We offer a much more liberal policy: We will use *any* story which is good, which stands up to a reasonable level of writing and human values, not to mention still plausible scientific concepts.

Human Values

There is another good reason for emphasizing human values in a science-fiction story. Science changes so rapidly that a story depending entirely upon some theory or gimmick is apt to be laughable in five years. Moreover this type never makes the best type of story. The best type is a story about people, with all their ramifications of character, their conflicts, passions—hates and loves—and the trouble they can get into, in pursuit of a scientific problem. This kind of story is true science fiction because it is about people but could not happen outside a science-fiction setting. The

(Continued on page 138)

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

AMENHOTEP IV,
Founder of Egypt's
Mystery Schools

This Sealed Book—FREE

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you A Sealed Book of explanation without obligation. This Sealed Book tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

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San Jose, California

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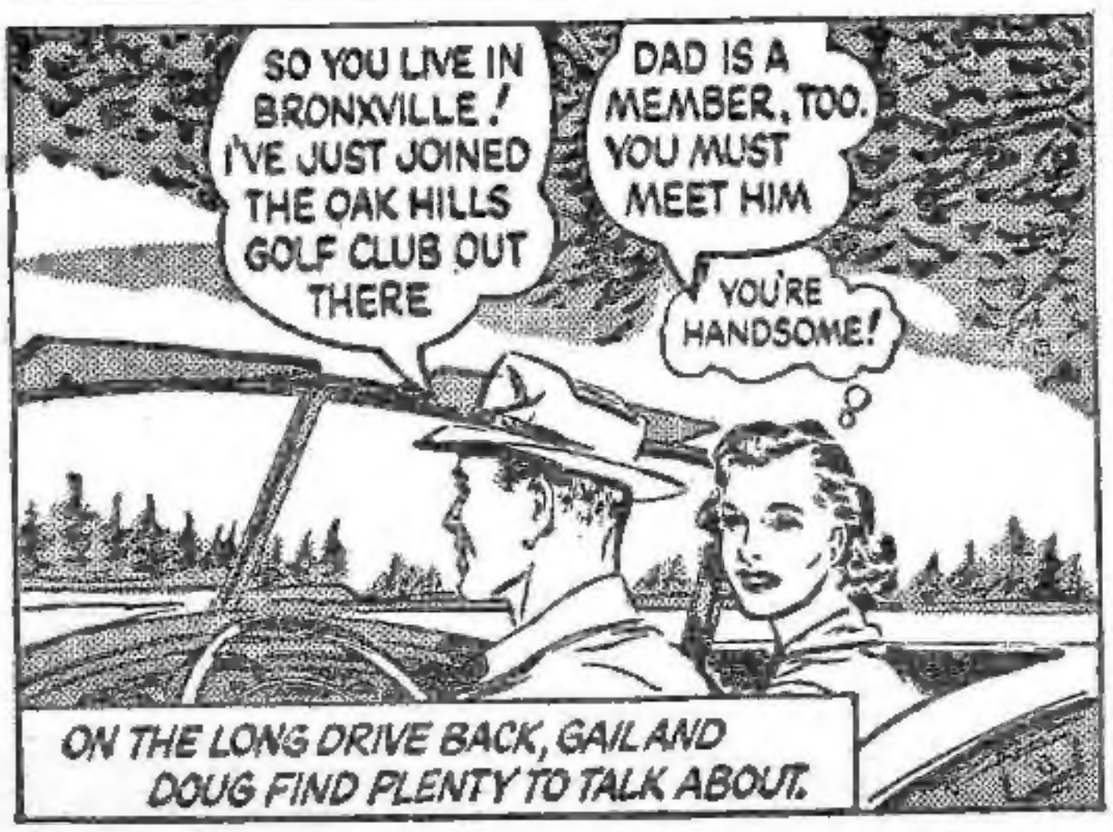
DOUG CAME TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

BOUND FOR NEW YORK CITY AFTER A WEEK'S FISHING TRIP, DOUG DAVIS WATCHES THE PILOT OF A CRASHING PLANE DRIFT INTO HEAVY TIMBER...

HE FINDS GAIL WILSON, CO-OWNER OF A NEW YORK AIR TAXI SERVICE IN A BAD SPOT.

I GO FOR THIS BLADE OF YOURS. SKIMMED 'EM OFF SLICK AS A WHISTLE!
WHISKERS DON'T COME TOO TOUGH FOR THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN!


SO YOU LIVE IN BRONXVILLE! I'VE JUST JOINED THE OAK HILLS GOLF CLUB OUT THERE
DAD IS A MEMBER, TOO. YOU MUST MEET HIM
YOU'RE HANDSOME!

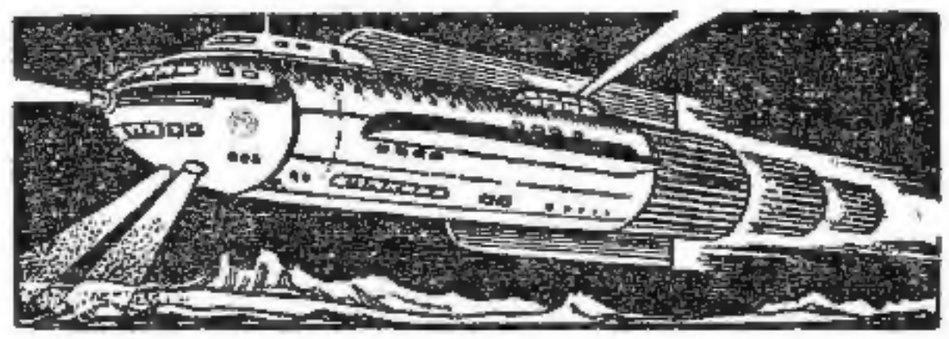
ON THE LONG DRIVE BACK, GAIL AND DOUG FIND PLENTY TO TALK ABOUT.

YOU GET FAST, EASY SHAVES AT A SAVING WITH THIN GILLETTES, AMERICA'S FAVORITE LOW-PRICED BLADES. THEY OUTLAST ORDINARY BLADES 2 TO 1 AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. SO FOR SHAVING COMFORT AT MINIMUM COST, ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢

TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

FIRST STOP: Mars or Venus?

Choosing Our Initial Interplanetary Destination



ALTHOUGH Mars is 9,000,000 miles farther from Earth than Venus (35,000,000 miles distant at the point of nearest approach as against 26,000,000 miles for Venus) the Red Planet probably will be selected by scientists as Man's first destination in interplanetary travel.

There are several good reasons for this logical supposition. First: Either of Mars' two tiny moons, Deimos and Phobos, could serve as an excellent space station for the pioneer space-ship's approach to the planet upon arrival and also for the take-off on the return trip to Earth.

Second: On Mars alone have we been able to detect definite signs of plant life. The famous "canals" certainly do exist on Mars, and may well be the waterways claimed in the theory advanced by the great American astronomer Percival Lowell. Modern star-gazers are prone to discount Lowell's idea that a vast network of waterways exists on Mars to bring water from the polar ice-caps to the arid deserts. Until proved otherwise, Lowell's interesting theory remains valid as any other.

Third: The blue-green "seas" of Mars are believed to be waterless seas, similar to those on the Moon. Unlike the dead seas on the Moon, however, the seas of Mars display interesting changes in color from season to season. During the bitter Martian winter, the seas are dark-brown in color, changing to green in spring and summer. Green is the color of plant life—of vegetation. Just what form this vegetation assumes is the subject of much discussion, although the consensus of erudite scientific opinion favors a hardy lichen perhaps unlike any on the Earth.

Speculation on intelligent animal life on Mars, or indeed any animal life at all, invariably touches off a spirited gab-fest between the advocates of two opposing theories. Ardent supporters of Theory Number One scoff at the chance of any animal life whatever existing on a planet where the main constituent of the extremely thin atmosphere, as revealed by the spectroscope, appears to be carbon dioxide. Equally firm supporters of Theory Number Two steadfastly point out that true scientists should not arbitrarily limit their thinking to previously known facts. Martian animals, the Theory Two boys argue, would be able to utilize carbon dioxide as naturally as Earth animals breathe oxygen.

Venus, although nearer to Earth than Mars, remains second choice in the "future book" with the learned gentlemen mapping out our Sky Ways of the decades to come. The perpetually cloud-wrapped planet we have poetically named for the ancient Italian Goddess of Bloom and Beauty has never once tossed aside her voluminous vapor robes to permit dazzled Earthmen to behold her inmost self. As a result of her coy reticence, astronomers never have been able even to determine Venus' period of rotation. Best guess seems to be that the Venusian "day" may be several Earth weeks in length.

Lack of precise knowledge of Venus is equally annoying to scientists and astronomers alike, since Venus may well be as habitable as our own Earth for animals adapted by necessity to live there. Here, as on Mars, the spectroscope has revealed the presence of vast quantities of carbon dioxide. No trace of water vapor or oxygen has been detected in the Venusian atmosphere. But science is no longer cocksure of anything, for it is surely true that "the more we learn, the more we discover our abysmal ignorance of almost everything." Some day mysterious Venus will be forced to share her secrets with Earth. Let's hope they turn out to be pleasant secrets!

—*Norman B. Wiltsey*

A MILLION YEARS

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A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER

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Through eons of Time came Ardath of Kyria, mobilizing the brains of Mankind for the creation of a new civilization

A Novel by HENRY KUTTNER

ARDATH opened his eyes, trying to remember why a blinding pain should be throbbing within his skull. Above him was a twisted girder of yellow metal, and beyond that, the inner wall of the space ship. What had happened?

It seemed scarcely a moment ago that the craft had been filled with a confusion of shouted orders, quickly moving men, and the shriek of cleft atmosphere as the ship drove down. Then had come the shock of landing—blackness. And now?

Painfully Ardath dragged his slight, fragile body erect. All around him were ruin and confusion. Corpses lay sprawled and limp, the bodies of those who had not survived the terrible concussion. Strange men, slim and delicate, their skins had been darkly tanned by the long voyage across space. Ardath started hopefully when he saw that one of the bodies moved slightly and moaned.

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TO CONQUER

A Novel by HENRY KUTTNER

Theron! Theron, the commander—highest in rank and wisdom—had survived. A wave of gratitude swept through Ardath. He was not alone on this new, unknown world, as he had feared. Swiftly he found stimulants and bent over the reviving man.

Theron's beardless gray face contorted. His pallid blue eyes opened. He drew a lean hand over his bald head as he whispered:

"Ardath—"

A rocking shudder shook the ship, then suddenly died.

"Who else is alive?" Theron asked with painful effort.

"I don't know, Theron," Ardath replied softly.

"Find out."

Ardath searched the huge golden ship. He came back with despair on his drawn, harrowed features.

"You and I are the only ones left alive, Theron."

The commander gnawed at his lips.

"So. And I am dying." He smiled resignedly at Ardath's sudden protest. "It's true, Ardath. You do not realize how old I am. For years we have gone through space, and you are the youngest of us. Unshield a port. Let me see where we are."

"The third planet of this System," Ardath said.

He pressed a button that swung back a shutter from a nearby port in the golden wall. They saw nothing but darkness at first. Then their eyes became accustomed to the gloom.

The ship lay beached on a dim shore. Blackly ominous the strange world loomed through the gray murk of vague light that filtered through the cloudy sky. A slow drizzle of rain was falling.

"Test the atmosphere," Theron commanded.

Ardath obeyed. Spectroscopic analysis, made from outer space, had indicated that the air here was breathable. The chemical test confirmed this. At Theron's request, Ardath opened a spacelock.

AIR with a queerly choking sulphurous odor surged in. The two men coughed rackingly, until eventually they became accustomed to it.

"Carry me out," the commander said quietly. His glance met and locked with Ardath's as the younger man hesitated. "I shall die soon," he insisted gently. "But first I must—I *must* know that I have reached my goal."

Silently Ardath lifted the slight figure in his arms. He splashed through the warm waves and gently laid Theron down on the barren beach. The Sun, hidden behind a cloud blanket, was rising in the first dawn Ardath had ever seen.

A gray sky and sea, a dark shore—those were all he actually saw. Under Ardath's feet he felt the world shudder with the volcanic fires of creation. Rain and tide had not yet eroded the rocks into sand and soil. No vegetation grew anywhere. He did not know whether the land was an island or a continent. It rose abruptly from the beach and mounted to towering crags against the inland skyline.

Theron sighed. His thin fingers groped blindly over the rocky surface on which he lay.

"You are space-born, Ardath," he said painfully. "You cannot quite realize that only on a planet can a man find a home. But I am afraid—" His voice died away. Then it rose again, strengthened. "I am dying, but there is something I must tell you first. Listen, Ardath. You never knew your mother planet, Kyria. It is light-years away from this world. Or it was. Centuries ago, we discovered that Kyria was doomed. A wandering planetoid came so close that it would inevitably collide with us and destroy our civilization utterly. Kyria was a lovely world, Ardath."

"I know," Ardath breathed. "I have seen the films in our records."

"You have seen our great cities, and the green forests and fields—" An agonizing cough rocked the dying comman-

der. He went on hastily, "We fled. A selected group of us made this space home. But of hundreds of planets that we found, none was suitable. None would sustain human life. This, the third planet of this yellow Sun, is our last hope. Our fuel is almost gone. It is your duty, Ardath, to see that the civilization of Kyria does not perish."

"But this is a dead world," the younger man protested.

"It is a young world," Theron corrected.

He paused, and his hand lifted, pointing. Ardath stared at the slow, sullen tide that rippled drearily toward them. The gloomy wash of water receded. And there on the rocky slope lay something that made him nod understandingly.

It was not large. A greasy, shining blob of slime, featureless and repulsive, it was unmistakably alive, undeniably sentient!

The shimmering globule of protoplasm was drawn back with the next wave. When Ardath's eyes met Theron's, the dying man smiled triumphantly.

"Life! There's Sun here, Ardath, beyond the clouds—a Sun that sends forth energy, cosmic rays, the rays of evolution. Immeasurable ages will pass before human beings exist here, but exist they will! Our study of countless other planets enables us to predict the course of evolution here. From the unicellular creatures will come sea-beings with vertebrae, then amphibiae, and true reptiles. Then warm-blooded beasts will evolve from the flying reptiles and the dinosaurs. Finally there will be apelike men, who will yield the planet to—true men!"

"But it will take millennia!"

"You must remain here," Theron stated. "You, who survived the voyage from Kyria. You must wait, Ardath, even a million years if it is necessary. Our stasis ray kept us in suspended animation while we came across space. Take the ship beyond the atmosphere. Adjust it to a regular orbit, like a second satellite around this world. Set the controls so you will awaken eventually, and be able to investigate the evolutionary progress of this planet. You will wait a long time, I admit. But finally you will find men."

"Men like us?"

Theron shook his head regretfully.

A Time-Tour of History

THE original blurb for A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER: "Get ready to embark on the most amazing excursion of all time! A thrill-a-minute journey that begins ten thousand centuries ago and rockets you into the wonderland of tomorrow. You'll witness mighty empires like forgotten Atlantis crumble to dust as Ardath, the searcher from the stars, prepares for the conquest of the future in—A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER."

It's interesting to compare this novel with the author's more recent WELL OF THE WORLDS. A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER is the Kuttner of more than a decade ago—a decade during which science fiction tossed away its short pants and began to behave like an adult. Kuttner's own development has been particularly impressive; yet A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER is colorful, imaginative, exciting—displaying in full force the power and originality which were then, and are now, Kuttner's personal trademark.

—The Editor

"No. Super-mentality is a matter of eugenically controlled breeding. Occasionally a mental giant will be born, but not often. On Kyria we bred and mated these mental giants, till eventually their progeny peopled the planet. You must do the same with this world."

"I will," Ardath consented. "But how—"

"Go through the ages. Do not stop till you find one of these mental giants. He will be easily recognized for, almost from infancy, he will be far in advance of his contemporaries. He will withdraw from them, turning to the pursuit of wisdom. He will be responsible for many of the great inventions of his time. Take this man—or woman, perhaps—and go on into time, until you have found a mental giant of the opposite sex.

"You could never mate with a female of this world, Ardath. Since you are from another System, it would be biologically impossible. The union would be sterile. This is your duty—find a super-mentality, take him from his own time-sector, and find a mate for him in the more distant future. From that union will arise a race of giants equal to the Kyrians. In a sense, you will have been their foster-father."

THERON sighed, turned his head till his cheek lay against the bare rock of the shore.

"May the great Architect guide you, Ardath," he said softly.

Abruptly his head slumped, and Theron was dead.

The gray waves whispered a requiem. Ardath stood silent, looking down at the worn, tired face, now relaxed in death.

He was alone, infinitely far from the nearest human being.

Then another feeling came, making him realize that he was no longer a homeless wanderer of space.

Never in his life had Ardath stood on a world's surface. The others had told him of Kyria, and on the pictorial library screens he had seen views of green and sunset lands that were agonizingly beautiful. Inevitably Ardath had come to fear the black immensity of the starlit void, to hate its cold, eternal changelessness. He had dreamed of walking on grassy, rolling plains.

That would come, for he knew Theron had been right. Cycads and ferns would grow where Ardath now stood. Amphibiae would come out of the waters and evolve, slowly of course, but with inexorable certainty. He could afford to wait.

First, though, he needed power. The great atomic engine of the ship was useless, exhausted.

Atomic power resembled dynamite in that it needed some outside source of energy to get it started. Dynamite required a percussion cap. The engine of the golden ship needed power. Solar energy? Lenses were required. Besides, the cloud blanket was an insurmountable handicap, filtering out most of the necessary rays. Coal? It would not exist here for ages.

A tremble shook the ground, and Ardath nodded thoughtfully. There was power below the power of seething lava, enormous pressures, and heat that could melt solid rock. Could it be harnessed?

Steam—a geyser! That would provide the necessary energy to start the atomic motor. After that, anything would be possible.

With a single regretful glance at the dead Theron, Ardath set out to explore the savage new world.

For two days and nights he hunted, growing haggard and weary. At last he found an area of lava streams, shuddering rock, and geysers. Steam feathered up into the humid air, and to the north a red glow brightened the gray sky.

Ardath stood for a while, watching. His quest was ended. Long weeks of arduous work still lay ahead, but now he had no doubt of ultimate success. The steam demons would set the atomic motor into operation. After that, he could rip ores from the ground and find chemicals. But after that?

The ship must be made spaceworthy

again, though not for another long voyage. Such a course would be fruitless. Of all the planets the Kyrians had visited, only this world was capable of supporting life.

As yet, mere cells of blind, insensate protoplasm swarmed in the sullen seas, but those cells would develop. Evolution would work upon them. Perhaps in a million years human beings, intelligent creatures, would walk this world. Then, one day, a super-mentality would be born, and Ardath would find that kindred mind. He would take that mental giant into the future, in search of a suitable mate. After dozens of generations there would arise a civilization that would rival that of Kyria—his home planet now utterly destroyed without trace.

TIME passed as Adath worked. He blasted out a grave for Theron on the shore where the old Kyrian had died. He repaired the golden craft. Tirelessly he toiled.

Five months later, the repaired space ship rose, carrying its single passenger. Through the atmosphere it fled. It settled into an orbit, became a second, infinitesimal moon revolving around the mother planet.

Within it, Ardath's robot machinery began to operate. A ray beamed out, touching and bathing the man's form, which was stretched on a low couch.

Slowly consciousness left Ardath. The atomic structure of his body was subtly altered. Electrons slowed in their orbits. Since they emitted no quanta, Ardath's energy was frozen in the utter motionlessness of stairs. Neither alive nor dead, he slept.

The ray clicked off. When Ardath wakened, he would see a different world, older and stronger. Perhaps it would even be peopled by intelligent beings.

Silently the space ship swept on. Far beneath it a planet shuddered in the Titanic grip of dying fires. The rains poured down, eroding, endless. The tides flowed and ebbed. Always the cloud veil shrouded the world that was to be called Earth. Amid the shattering thunder of deluges, new lands rose and continents were formed.

Life, blind, hungry and groping, crawled up on the beaches, where it basked for a time in the dim sunlight.

II

ON AUGUST 7, 1924, an eight-year-old boy caused a panic in a Des Moines theater.

His name was Stephen Court. He had been born to a theatrical family of mediocre talent—the Crazy Courts, they were billed. The act was a combination of gags, dances and humorous songs. Stephen traveled with his parents on tour, when they played one-night stands and small vaudeville circuits. In 1924, vaudeville had not yet been killed by the films. It was the beginning of the Jazz Age.

Stephen was so remarkably intelligent, even as a child, that he was soon incorporated into the act as a "mental wizard." He wore a miniature cap and gown, and was introduced by his parents at the end of their turn.

"Any date—ask him any historical date, my friends, and he will answer! The gentleman in the third row. What do you want to know?"

And Stephen would answer accurately. When did Columbus discover America? When was the Magna Charta signed? When was the Battle of Hastings? When was Lafayette born?

"Mathematical questions? You, there—"

Stephen would answer. Mathematics was no riddle for him, neither dates nor algebra. The value of pi? He knew it. Formulas and equations slipped glibly from his tongue. He stood on the stage in the spotlight, his small face impassive, a small, dark-haired child with curiously luminous brown eyes, and answered all questions.

He read omnivorously every book he could manage to obtain. He was coldly

unemotional, which distressed his mother, and he hid his thoughts well.

Then, on that August night, his life suddenly changed.

The act was almost over. The audience was applauding wildly. The Courts stood on each side of the boy, bowing. And Stephen stood motionless, his strange, glowing eyes staring out into the gloom of the theater.

"Take your bows, kid," Court hissed from the side of his mouth.

But the boy didn't answer. There was an odd tensity in his rigid posture. His expressionless face seemed strained. Only in his eyes was there life, and a terrible fire.

In the theater, a whisper grew to a murmur and the applause died. Then the murmur swelled to a restrained roar, until someone screamed:

"Fire!"

The elder Court glanced around quickly. He could see no signs of smoke or flame. But he made a quick gesture, and the orchestra leader struck up a tune. Hastily the man and woman went into a routine tap dance.

"Steve!" Court said urgently. "Join in!"

But Stephen just stood there, and through the theater the roar rose to individual screams of panic. The audience no longer watched the stage. They sprang up and fought their way to the exits, cursing, pushing, crowding.

Nothing could stop it. By sheer luck no one was killed. But in ten minutes the theater was empty—and there had been no sign of a fire.

In his dressing room, Court looked queerly at his son.

"What was wrong with you tonight, kid?" he asked, as he removed greasepaint from his face with cold cream.

"Nothing," Stephen said abstractedly.

"Something funny about the whole thing. There wasn't any fire."

Stephen sat on a chair, his legs swinging idly.

"That magician we played with last week—" he began.

"Yeah?"

"I got some ideas from him."

"Well?" his father urged.

"I watched him when he hypnotized a man from the audience. That's all it was. I hypnotized the entire audience tonight."

"Oh, cut it out," Curt said, grinning.

"It's true! The conditions were right. Everyone's attention was focused on me. I made them think there was a fire."

When Court turned and looked at the boy, he had an odd feeling that this was not his son sitting opposite him. The round face was childish, but the eyes were not. They were cold, watchful, direct.

Court laughed without much conviction.

"You're crazy," he said, turning back to the light-rimmed mirror.

"Maybe I am," Stephen said lightly. "I want to go to school. Will you send me?"

"I can't afford it. Anyway, you're too big an attraction. Maybe we can manage later."

STEPHEN did not argue. He rose and went toward his mother's dressing room, but he did not enter. Instead, he turned and left the theater.

He had determined to run away.

Stephen already knew that his brain was far superior to the average. It was as yet unformed, requiring knowledge and capable training. Those he could never get through his parents. He felt no sorrow or pity on leaving them. His cool intellect combined with the natural cruelty of childhood to make him unemotional, passionlessly logical.

But Stephen needed money, and his youth was a handicap. No one would employ a child, he knew, except perhaps as a newsboy. Moreover, he had to outwit his parents, who would certainly search for their son.

Strangely there was nothing pathetic about Stephen's small figure as he trudged along the dark street. His iron singleness of purpose and his ruthless

will gave him a certain incongruous dignity. He walked swiftly to the railroad station.

On the way he passed a speakeasy. A man was lying in the gutter before the door, an unshaven derelict, grizzled of hair and with worn, dissolute features. He was mumbling drunkenly and striving helplessly to rise.

Stephen paused to watch. Attracted by the silent gaze, the man looked up. As the two glances met, inflexible purpose grew in the boy's pale face.

"Wanna—drink," the derelict mumbled. "Gotta. They won't give old Sammy a drink."

Stephen's eyes again grew luminous. They seemed to bore into the watery eyes of the hobo, probing, commanding.

"Eh?" the drunkard asked blankly, and his voice died off uncertainly as he staggered erect.

Stephen gripped his arm, and the two went down the street. In a dark doorway they paused. The foggy, half-wrecked brain of the tramp was no match for Stephen's hypnotic powers. Sammy listened as the boy talked.

"You're catching a freight out of town. You're taking me with you. Do you understand?"

"Eh?" Sammy asked vaguely.

In a monotonous voice the boy repeated his commands. When the drunkard finally understood, the two headed for the railway station.

Stephen's plans were made. To all appearance, he was a mere child. He could not possibly have fulfilled his desires alone. The authorities would have returned him to his parents, or he would have been sent to a school as a public charge. What man could recognize in a young boy an already blossoming genius. Stephen's super-mentality was seriously handicapped by his immaturity.

He needed a guardian, purely nominal, to satisfy the prejudices of the world. Through Sammy he could act. Sammy would be his tongue, his hands, his legal representative. Men would be willing to deal with Sammy, where they would have laughed at a child. But first the tramp would have to be metamorphosed into a "useful citizen."

MARION BARTON

That night, they rode in a chilly box-

car, headed east. Hour after hour Stephen worked on the brain of his captive. Sammy must be his eyes, his hands, his provider.

Once Sammy had been a mechanic, he revealed under Stephen's relentless probing. The train rolled on through the darkness, the wheels beating a clicking threnody toward the East.

Stephen's task was not easy, for the habits of years had weakened Sammy's body and mind. He was a confirmed tramp, lazy, and content to follow the call of his wanderlust. But always Stephen drove him on, arguing, commanding, convincing. Hypnosis played a large part in the boy's ultimate success.

Sammy got a job, much against his will, and washed dishes in a cheap restaurant for a few weeks. He shaved daily and consistently drank less. Meanwhile Stephen waited, but he did not wait in idleness. He spent his days visiting automobile agencies and studying the machines. At night he crouched in a cheap tenement room, sketching and designing. Finally he spoke to Sammy.

"I want you to get another job. You will be a mechanic in an automobile factory." He watched Sammy's reaction.

"Aw, I can't Steve," the man protested. "They wouldn't even look at me. Let's hit the road again, huh?"

"Show them these," Stephen ordered, extending a sheaf of closely written papers and drawings. "They'll give you a job."

AT FIRST the foreman told Sammy to get out, after a glance at his red-rimmed eyes and weak, worn face. But the papers were a magic password. The foreman pondered over them, bewilderedly scrutinized Sammy, and went off to confer with one of the managers.

"The man's good!" he blurted. "He doesn't look it, but he's an expert mechanic, just the kind of man we need. Look at these improvements he's worked out! This wiring change will save us thousands annually. And this gear ratio. It's new, but it might work. I think—"

"Send him in," the manager said hastily.

Sammy got his job. Actually he wasn't much good, but every month or two he would show up with some new improvement, some unexpected invention that got him raises instead of dismissal. Of course Stephen was responsible for all this. He had adopted Sammy.

Stephen saw to it that they moved to a more convenient apartment, and now he went to school. Needing surprisingly little sleep, he spent most of his time studying. There was so much to learn, and so little time! To acquire the knowledge he wanted, he needed more and more money to pay for tutoring and equipment.

The years passed with a peaceful lack of haste. Sammy drank little now, and took a great deal of interest in his work. But he was still a tramp at heart, eternally longing for the open road. Sometimes he would try to slip away, but Stephen was always too watchful.

At last the boy was ready for the next step. It was then early in 1927. After months of arduous toil, he had completed several inventions which he thought valuable. He had Sammy patent them, and then market them to the highest bidders.

The result was more money than Stephen had expected. He made Sammy resign his job, and the two of them retired to a country house. He brought along several tutors, and had a compact, modern laboratory set up. When more money was required, the boy would putter around for awhile. Inevitably he emerged with a new formula that increased the already large annual income.

Tutors changed as Stephen grew older and learned more. He attended college for a year, but found he could apply his mind better at home. He needed a larger headquarters, though. So they moved to Wisconsin and bought a huge old mansion, which he had renovated.

His quest for knowledge seemed endless, yet he did not neglect his health. He went for long walks and exercised mightily.

When finally he grew to manhood, he was a magnificent specimen, strong, well-formed and handsome. But always, save for a few occasional lapses, he was coldly unemotional.

Once he had detectives locate his parents, and anonymously arranged to provide a large annual income for them. But he would not see either his father or mother.

"They would mean emotional crises," he told Sammy. "There would be unnecessary arguments. By this time they have forgotten me, anyway. That's certain."

"Think so?" Sammy muttered, chewing on the stem of his ancient pipe. His nut-brown, wrinkled face looked rather puzzled under his stiff crop of white hair. "Well, I never did think you was human, Stevie."

He shook his head, put the pipe away, and pottered off in search of one of his rare drinks. Stephen returned to his work.

What was the purpose of these years of intensive study? He scarcely knew. His mind was a vessel to be filled with the clear, exhilarating liquor of knowledge. As Sammy's system craved alcohol, so Stephen's brain thirsted for wisdom. Study and experiment were to him a precious delight that approached actual ecstasy. As an athlete gets keen pleasure from the exercise of his well-trained body, so Stephen exulted in the exercise of his mind.

Unimaginable eons before, in the teeming seas of a primeval world, life-forms had fed their blind hunger. That was appetite of the flesh.

Stephen's hunger was the appetite of the mind. But it also made him blind, in a different way. He was a godlike man, and he was, by ordinary standards, unhuman.

By 1941 he was the greatest scientist in the world.

III

BEFORE man created gods, Ardath was. In his space ship, swinging silently around the world, he slept as the ages went past.

Sometimes he woke and searched, always in vain, for intelligent life in the land below. The road of evolution was long and bloody.

Dark weariness shrouded Ardath as he saw the vast, mindless, terrible behemoths of the oceans. Monsters wallowed into the swamps. The ground shook beneath the tread of tyrant lizards. Brontosaurs and pterodactyls lived and fed and died.

There were mammals—oehippus the fleet and three-toed, and a tiny marsupial in which the flame of intelligence glowed feebly. But the Titan reptiles ruled. Mammals could not survive in this savage, thundering world.

Forests of weeds and bamboo towered in a tropical zone that stretched almost to the poles. Ardath pondered, studied for a time in his laboratory—and the Ice Age came.

Was Ardath responsible? Perhaps. His science was not Earthly, and his powers were unimaginable. The ice mountains swept down, blowing their frigid breath upon the forests and the reptile giants.

Southward the hegira fled. It was the Day of Judgment for the idiot colossi that had ruled too long.

But the mammals survived. Shuddering in the narrow equatorial belt they starved and whimpered. But they lived, and they evolved, while Ardath slept again. . . .

When he awoke, he found beast-men, hairy and ferocious. They dwelt in gregarious packs, ruled by an Old Man who had proved himself strongest of the band.

But always the chill winds of the ice-lands tore at them as they crouched in their caves.

Ardath found one, wiser than the rest, and taught him the use of fire.

Then the alien man sent his ship arrowing up from Earth, while flames began to burn wanly before cave mouths. In grunts and sign language the story was told. Ages later, men would tell the tale of Prometheus, who stole fire from the very gods of heaven.

Folk-lore is filled with the legends of men who visited the gods—the Little People or the Sky-dwellers—and returned with strange powers. Arrows and spears, the smelting of ores, the sowing and reaping of grain. How many inventions could be traced to Ardath?

But at last Ardath slept for a longer time than ever before, and then he awoke.

Dark was the city. Flambeaux were as numerous as fireflies in the gloomy streets. The metropolis lay like a crouching beast on the shore, a vast conglomeration of stone, crude and colossal.

The ship of Ardath hung far above the city, unseen in the darkness of the night. Ardath himself was busy in his laboratory, working on a curiously constructed device that measured the frequency and strength of mentality. Thought created electrical energy, and Ardath's machine registered the power of that energy. Delicately he sent an invisible narrow-wave beam down into the city far beneath.

On a gage a needle crept up, halted, dipped, and mounted again. Ardath reset a dial. Intelligent beings dwelt on Earth now, but their intelligence was far inferior to Ardath's. He was searching for a higher level.

The needle was inactive as Ardath swept the city with his ray. Useless! The pointer did not even quiver. The mental giant Ardath sought was not here, though this was the greatest metropolis of the primeval world.

But suddenly the needle jerked slightly. Ardath halted the ray and turned to a television screen. Using the beam as a carrier, he focused upon a scene that sprang into instant visibility.

He saw a throne of black stone upon which a woman sat. Tall and majestic, an Amazon of forty or more, she had lean, rugged features, and wore plain garments of leather.

Guards flanked her, gigantic, stolid, armed with spears. Before the throne a man stood, and it was at this man that Ardath stared.

For months the Kyrian's ship had scoured the skies, searching jungles and deserts. Few cities existed. On the northern steppes, shaggy beast-men still dwelt in caves, fighting the mammoth. But the half-men and the hairy elephants were rapidly degenerating. In mountain lakes were villages built on stilts, and piers sunken into the mud, but these clans were barbarous. Only on this island were there civilization and intelligence, though lamentably lower than Ardath's own level.

THE man from space watched the wisest human on this primitive Earth.

In chains the Earthman stood before the black stone throne. He was huge, massively thewed, with a bronzed, hairy skin showing through the rags he wore. His face resembled that of a beast, ferocious with hatred. Amber cat's-eyes glared from beneath the beetling brows. The jutting jaw was hidden by a wiry beard that tangled around the nose that was little more than a snout.

Yet in that brute body, Ardath knew, dwelt amazing intelligence. Shrewdness and cunning were well-masked by the hideous face and form.

What of the Queen? Curious to know, Ardath tested her with his ray. She, too, was more intelligent than most of the savages.

"These two are enemies," Ardath thought. "And I imagine that the man faces danger or death. Well, what is that to me? I cannot live in a time where all are barbarians. It is best that I sleep again."

Yet he hesitated, one hand resting lightly on the controls that would send the ship racing up into space. The barren loneliness of the void, the slow cen-

turies of his dark vigil, crept with icy tentacles into his mind. He thought of the equally long, miserably lonely future.

"Suppose I sleep again and wake in a dead world? It could happen, for my own home planet was destroyed. How could I face another search through space? Theron and the rest had each other."

He turned back again to watch the two people on the screen.

"They are intelligent, after a fashion, and they would be companions. If I took them with me, and we woke in a lifeless time, they could bring forth a new race which I could train eugenically into the right pattern."

The decision was made. Ardath would sleep again in his ship—but this time not alone.

He glanced at the screen, and his eyes widened. A new factor had entered the problem. Hastily he turned to a complicated machine at his side. . . .

As Thordred the Usurper stood before the throne of his queen, his savage face was immobile. Weaponless, fettered, he nevertheless glared with implacable fury at the woman who had spoiled his plans.

Zana met his gaze coldly. Her harsh features were darkly somber.

"Well?" she asked. "Have you anything to say to me?"

"Nothing," Thordred grunted. "I have failed. That is all."

The huge, almost empty throne room echoed his words eerily.

"Aye, you have failed," the queen said. "And there is but one fate for losers who revolt. You tried to force me from my throne, and instead you stand in chains before me. You have lost, so you must die."

Thordred's grin mocked her calm decision.

"And a woman continues to rule our land. Never in history has this shame been put upon us. Always we have been ruled by men—warriors!"

"You call me weakling?" Zana snarled at him. "By all the gods, you are rash, Thordred. You know well that I've never shirked battle, and that my sword has been swift to slay. I am strong as a man and more cunning than you."

"Yet you are a woman," Thordred taunted recklessly. "Kill me, if you wish, but you cannot deny your sex."

A shadow darkened Zana's face as she glared venomously at her mocker.

"Aye, I shall kill you," she said. "So slowly that you will beg for a merciful death. Then the vultures will pick your carcass clean on the Mountain of the Gods."

Thordred suddenly shouted with laughter.

"Save your words, wench. It is like a woman to threaten with words. A man's vengeance is with a spear, swift and sudden. I—"

He paused, and a curious light came into his amber eyes. His great body tensed as he listened.

In the distance, a tumult grew louder and louder, like the beating of the sea. Suddenly it was thundering through the throne room.

Zana, the Amazon, sprang to her feet, her lips parted in astonishment.

The vast doors at the end of the room burst inward. Through the portal poured a yelling mob.

"Thordred!" they roared. "Ho, Thordred!"

The giant grinned victoriously at Zana.

"Some are still faithful to me, it seems. They would rather see a man on the throne—"

A blistering curse burst from Zana's lips. She snatched a spear from a guard and savagely drove its point at the prisoner. But Thordred sprang aside, laughing, the muscles rolling effortlessly under his tawny skin.

HE SET his foot on the links of the chain that bound his wrists. His body arched like a bow. The metal snapped asunder, and Thordred the Usurper was free!

The guards near the throne leaped at him. He ducked under a swift spear at the same instant that his fist smashed a face into a bloody ruin. And then the mob surrounded him, lifted him, bore him back.

"Slay him!" Zana shrilled. "Slay him!"

The mob swept back, out of the hall, through the great doors and into the street.

But now Zana's cries brought a response. Armed soldiers rushed in through a dozen portals. They raced after the escaping prisoner, with Zana fearlessly leading them.

It was sunset. The western sky flamed blood-red. Down the street the crowd seethed, to halt in an open plaza. Grimly menacing, they turned at bay, Thordred at their head. He towered above the others with his chains dangling from his wrists and ankles.

Zana's men formed into a sizable army, filling the street from side to side. Arrows flew, hissing at the angry, triumphant mob. Over the city the low, thunderous muttering grew louder.

"Revolt! *Revolt!*

It was civil war.

But the conflicting forces were not yet in contact. A space still lay between. Only spears and arrows had crossed it.

"Charge!" Zana shouted. "Slay them all!"

Grinning, Thordred raised high his lance and shook it defiantly.

The queen's soldiers drew erect, and like a thunder-cloud they began to move. Abruptly they were sweeping forward, irresistible, a tidal wave bristling with steel barbs. The pounding of their shod feet hammered loud on the stones. In the forefront raced Zana, her harsh face twisted with fury.

Thordred let fly his spear. It missed its mark. At the last moment the giant had hesitated, and his gaze went up to the western sky. His jaw dropped in awe. For the first time, Thordred was afraid. A scream rose, thin and wailing.

"Demons!" someone cried. "Demons!"

The soldiers slowed involuntarily in their charge, then one by one they halted. Struck motionless with fearful wonder, every man stood gaping toward the west.

Against the blood-red sunset loomed actual demons!

Giants, scores of feet tall, they were. Titans whose heads towered above the city's walls. A whole army of the monsters loomed black against the scarlet sky. These were not men! Shaggy, hump-shouldered, dreadful beings more human than apes but unmistakably beasts, they came thundering down upon the city. The frightful mask twisted in ferocious hunger. They swept forward.

No one noticed that their advance made not the slightest sound. Panic struck the mobs. Both sides dropped their weapons to flee.

From the sky a great, shining globe dropped. It hovered above the plaza. Two beams of light flashed down from it. One struck Thordred, bathing him in crawling radiance. The other caught Zana.

The man and the woman alike were held motionless. Frozen, paralyzed, they were swept up, lifted into the air. When they reached the huge globe, they seemed to disappear.

The sphere then rose, dwindled quickly to a speck and was gone.

Surprisingly the giants had also vanished. . . .

Ardath adjusted the controls. Sighing, he turned away. The ship was back in its orbit, circling the Earth. It would not deviate from that course for centuries, until the moment Ardath's hand moved its controls.

He picked up a small metal box, stepped out of the laboratory and closed the panel. On the floor at his feet lay the unconscious forms of Zana and Thordred. Ardath set down the box.

This would be a new experiment, one that he had never tried. He could not speak the language of these Earthlings, nor could they speak his. But knowledge could be transmitted from one brain to

another. Thought patterns were a form of energy, and that could be transferred, just as a matrix may stamp out duplicates.

FIRST, the man. Ardath opened the black box, took out a circular metallic band and adjusted it about the sleeping Thordred's head. A similar band went about his own. He pressed a switch, felt a stinging, tingling sensation within his skull.

He removed the metal bands, replaced them, and waited patiently. Would the experiment work? His lips shaped unfamiliar syllables. He had learned Thordred's language—but could the undeveloped brain of the Earthling be equally receptive?

Thordred groaned and opened his eyes. He stared up at Ardath. Into those amber eyes came a curious look that might have been amazement, but which was certainly not fear.

"You are not hurt," Ardath said in Thordred's harsh, primitive language. "Nor will you be harmed."

The Earthling stood up with an effort, breathing hoarsely. He took an unsteady step, reeled, collapsed with a shattering crash upon the thought transference apparatus. He lay silent and unmoving, an

The inhuman eyes were brightly-radiant pools

utterly helpless strong man.

No expression showed on Ardath's face, though the work of weeks had been ruined. The device could be built again, though he did not know if it should be. Had it been successful?

Thordred shuddered, rolled over. Painfully he rose and leaned weakly against the wall. His amber eyes rested puzzledly on Ardath as he asked a question in the Kyrian's soft language, which grated from his crude throat.

"Who are you, a god or a demon?"

Ardath smiled with satisfaction, for all was going well: He must explain matters to this Earthling to calm his fears. Later, he would rebuild the machine and teach Zana his own tongue. Then the three could sleep, for centuries if necessary.

But Ardath did not know that his device had worked too well. It had transferred knowledge of his own language to Thordred's brain, yet it had transferred more than that. All of Ardath's memories had been transmitted to the mind of the Earthling!

At that moment, Thordred's wisdom was as great as that of his captor. Though he had not Ardath's potentiality for learning more, unearthly, amazing wisdom had been impressed on his brain cells. Thordred had smashed the machine, not through accident, but with coldly logical purpose. It would not do for Zana to acquire Ardath's wisdom also.

With an effort, Thordred kept an expression of stupid wonder on his face. He must play his rôle carefully. Ardath must not yet suspect that another man shared his secrets.

Ardath was speaking, carefully explaining things that his captive already knew. While Thordred seemed to listen, he swiftly pondered and discarded plans. Zana must die, of course. As for sleeping for centuries—well, it was not a pleasant thought. Ardath must be slain, so Thordred could return to Earth with new knowledge.

"The giants you saw in the sky," said Ardath, "were not real. They were three-dimensional projections, enlarged by my apparatus. I recorded the originals of those beings ages ago, when they actually lived and fought cave-bears and saber-toothed tigers."

No, they were merely images, but men had seen them and remembered. The panic in the city below had died. In its place grew superstitious dread, fostered by the priests. Time passed, and neither Zana nor Thordred returned. New rulers arose to sit upon the black throne.

But on the Mountain of the Gods, men toiled under the lash of the priests. Monstrous images of stone rose against the sky, gap-mouthed, fearsome images in crude similitude of the devils who had come out of the sunset.

"They may return," the priests warned. "But the stone giants on the mountain will frighten them away. Build them higher! They will guard our city."

On the peak the blind, alien faces glared ever into the sunset. And the days fled into years, and the dark centuries shrouded Earth. Continents crumbled. The eternal seas rose and washed new shores.

But the blind gods stayed to guard that which no longer needed guarding. And still they watch, those strange, alien statues on Easter Island.

IV

NEW YEAR'S DAY, 1941, was momentous for Stephen Court. Most of December, 1940, he had spent in his laboratories, engrossed with a task the nature of which he explained to no one. The great Wisconsin mansion, where he lived with his staff, had been metamorphosed into a fortress of science, though from the outside it appeared to be merely an antique, dilapidated structure. But nearby villagers viewed with suspicion the activity around Stephen Court's home.

The local post-office was deluged with

letters and packages. At all hours automobiles arrived, carrying cryptic burdens for Court.

Slyly the villagers questioned Sammy, for he often wandered into the combination store and post-office, to sit by the stove and puff great, reeking fumes from his battered pipe. Sammy had not changed much with the years. His hair had turned white, but there were only a few more creases in his brown face. Since moving to Wisconsin, Stephen had relaxed the anti-liquor restriction, but Sammy had learned the value of moderation.

"What's going on up at your place?" the storekeeper asked him, proffering a bottle.

Sammy drank two measured gulps and wiped his lips.

"The Lord only knows," he sighed. "It's way beyond me. Stevie's a swell boy, though. You can bet on that."

"Yeah!" retorted somebody, with an angry snort. "He's a cold-blooded fish, you mean. He ain't human. He's got ice-water in his veins. Comes and goes without so much as a howdy-do."

"He's thinking," Sammy defended sturdily. "Got a lot on his mind these days, Stevie has. He gets about two hours' sleep a night."

"But what's he doin'?"

"I don't know," admitted Sammy. "Inventing something, maybe."

"More than likely he'll blow us all up one of these fine days," grunted the storekeeper. The loungers nodded in agreement. "Here's the train coming in. Hear it?"

Sammy settled himself more comfortably. "There ought to be a package for Stevie, then."

There was. The old man took the parcel and left the station. He stood for a time, watching the train disappear into the distance. Its whistle sang a seductive song that aroused nostalgia in Sammy's bosom. He sighed, remembering the old days when he had been a hungry, carefree bindle-stiff. Well, he was better off now—well-fed and cared for, without any worries. But it was nice to hear a train whistle once in a while.

He climbed into the roadster and zoomed off toward the mansion. Ten minutes later he let himself into the hall, to be met by an anxious-eyed girl in a white uniform.

"Did it come?" she asked.

"Sure, Marion. Here it is."

He gave her the parcel. Holding it tightly, she turned and hurried away.

Since Marion Barton's arrival three years ago, she had become a fixture in the house. She had been hired, at first, as a temporary laboratory assistant, during the absence of the regular one. But she had interested young Court, who had seen surprising capabilities in her.

The fact that Marion was altogether lovely—slim, brown-eyed, dark-haired, with a peach complexion and remarkably kissable lips—meant nothing at all to Court. He merely catalogued her as a perfect physical specimen, thoroughly healthy, and concentrated on the more interesting occupation of investigating her mind. What he found there pleased him.

"She's intelligent," he told Sammy, "and she is meticulously careful. I've never seen her make a mistake. She's such a perfect assistant for me that we work in complete harmony. The girl seems to know exactly what I want, whether to hand me a scalpel or a lens, and she's completely unemotional. I shall keep her on, Sammy, and train her."

"Uh-huh," said the old man, nodding wisely. "She does all that, and she's completely unemotional, eh? Well, maybe so. Sure she ain't in love with you, Stevie?"

"Rot!" Court snapped, but it made him think it was necessary to warn Marion. "I'll pay you well," he explained to her, "and give you an invaluable training. But I have no time for emotional unbalance. I cannot afford distractions. Do you understand me?"

"Well," Marion observed with desper-

ate levity, "I'll wear horn-rimmed glasses if you want, and hoop-skirts if my legs distract you."

"Not at all. I merely mean that there must be no question of any—well, infatuation."

Marion was silent for a moment, though her eyes sparkled dangerously.

"All right," she said quietly. "I won't fall in love with you, Mr. Court. Is that satisfactory?"

"Quite," Court said.

He turned away, obviously dismissing the subject, while Marion glared at his retreating back.

She was remembering this scene now as she went into Court's laboratory. He was bent over a table, one eye to a microscope, his lips tensely pursed. Marion waited till he had finished his count. He straightened and saw her.

"Got it?" he asked calmly. "Good."

Court ripped open the package and drew out a small, leather-bound notebook. Hastily he flipped through the pages. His strong, tanned face darkened.

"Wait a minute, Marion," he called as the girl moved to leave. "I want to talk to you."

"Yes?"

"Er—this is New Year's Eve, I know. Had you planned on doing anything tonight?"

Marion's brown eyes widened. She stared at him in amazement. Was he trying to date her?

"Why, I did plan on—"

"I should appreciate it," he said, without a trace of embarrassment, "if you would stay and help me with some research tonight. I regret having to say this, but it's rather important. I want to verify certain tests."

"I'll stay," Marion assented briefly, but she flushed.

"Good. Stain these slides, please."

For several hours the two worked in silence, Court engrossed with his microscope, the girl busy dying the samples. Finally Court exhausted a small tank and conducted experiments in the vacuum that he had created.

Time dragged on till the huge old house was utterly still. The chill of a Wisconsin winter blanketed it, making frost patterns on the window panes. Inside the room it was warm enough, though snow lay thickly on the ground outside.

Presently Marion slipped out of the room, and returned bearing a tray of coffee and sandwiches. She set the tray on a table and glanced at Court. Standing by a window, he was idly smoking a cigarette.

"Mr. Court—"

"What is it?" he asked, without looking around. His face was upturned to the quiet night outside as he spoke again, not waiting for her answer. "Come here."

Marion obeyed. She was astonished to see that his face was drawn and haggard, actually gray around the lips. But his eyes were feverishly bright.

"Up there," he said, pointing. "Do you see anything?"

The cold stars glittered frostily in an abyss of empty black. Some icy breath of the unknown seemed to blow down from the frigid, airless seas between the planets. Marion shuddered.

"I see nothing unusual," she said.

"Naturally. No one has. There's nothing visible, and yet—" Wearily he rubbed his forehead. "It's impossible that my experiments have lied."

"Drink some coffee," Marion urged.

Court followed her to the table and sat down. As she poured the steaming liquid, his somber eyes dwelt on her face.

"Are you game for an airplane trip into Canada?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes. When?"

"As soon as I can arrange it. There's a man I must see, a—a patient." He gulped down untasted coffee and blinked tiredly.

"You should get at least a little sleep."

"Not yet. I don't know—" He came to a sudden decision. "Marion, you don't know anything about this experiment I'm working on. No one knows

about it yet, except me. All this data I've been collecting lately has been for a purpose. You haven't any idea what that purpose is, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well," Court declared, with curious calm, "it's simply this—I have reason to believe that the Earth is going to be destroyed. Wait a minute!" he cried hastily. "Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned this till I was absolutely certain. But I want to talk to someone."

His unrealized loneliness showed naked for an unguarded second on his face. He caught himself, and was once more impassive.

"The Earth is going to face a plague that will destroy civilization. Of that, at least, I am certain."

"A plague!" she breathed.

"I call it that, for lack of a better term. Every being on this planet will be affected by it."

Marion looked at him sharply. Her lovely eyes narrowed.

"Affected? Don't you mean destroyed?"

Court pushed back his chair and rose.

"No," he whispered, "I don't." His grave lips went hard. "Come here, Marion. Look at this."

He strode to a safe in the wall, opened it, and withdrew a small oblong box of lead. Set in one face was a round, transparent disc.

"Look through the lens," he commanded. "Don't get too close to that thing, though."

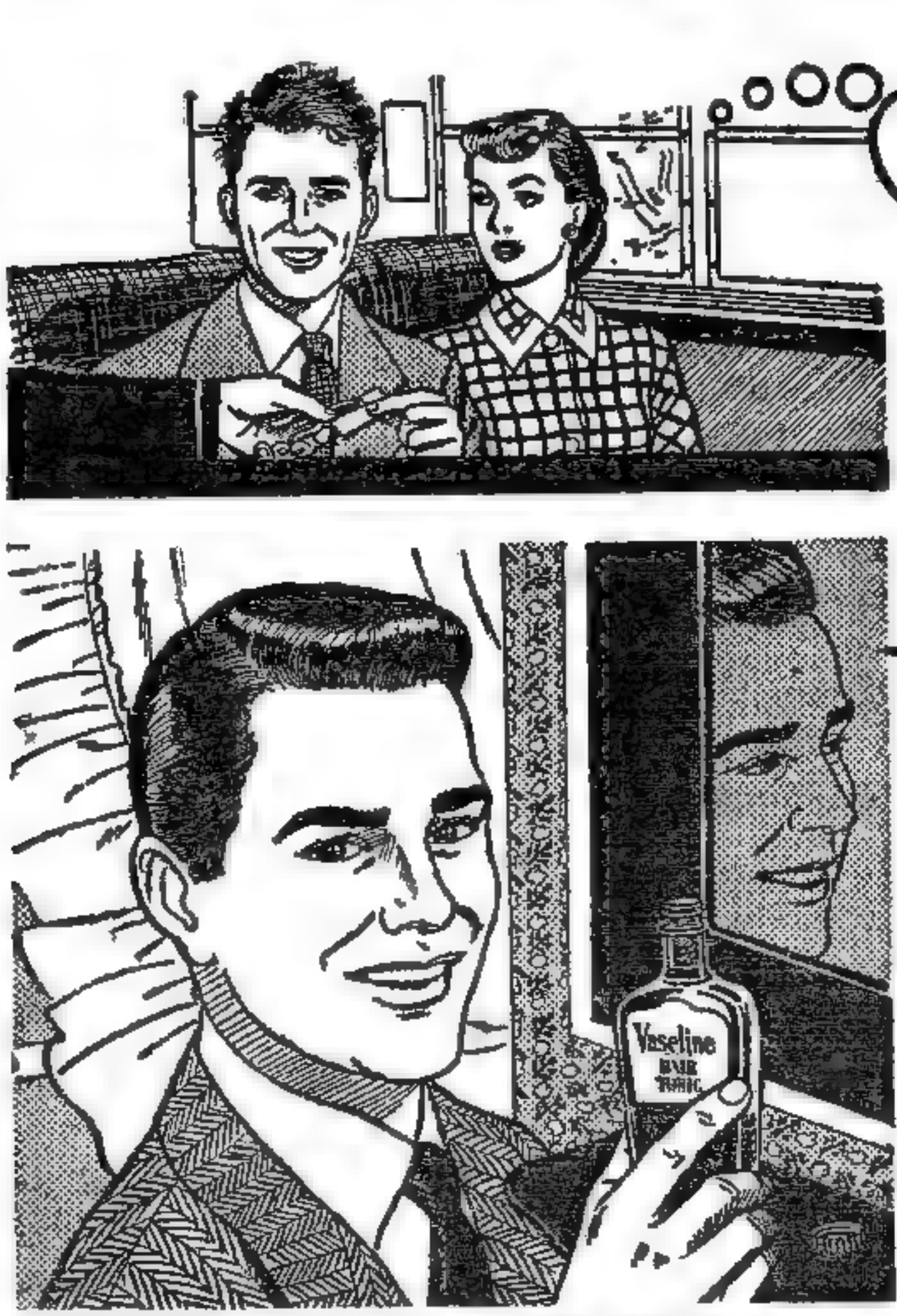
Marion obeyed. Through the tiny pane, she could see within the box a shining lump of matter, no larger than the nail of her thumb.

"It's phosphorescent," she said. "What is it—an ore?"

"A specimen of flesh taken from the thigh of a man named Pierre Locicault, a French-Canadian."

"Flesh?" The girl peered again at the object. "Was he exposed to radium?"

[*Turn page*]



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Court replaced the box in the safe.

"No, nothing like that. Locicault lived in a little settlement in a valley in the wilderness. A month ago he staggered into the nearest town, emaciated and nearly dead. His story was just about unbelievable. He claimed that one day a heavy fog—abnormally heavy—blanketed his valley, and affected the inhabitants peculiarly. They became incredibly hungry, ate enormous meals. Their skin became hot to the point of high fever. And they grew so old that most of them died. Locicault went for help, but nobody recognized him when he arrived in town. He looked thirty years older. What does that suggest to you, Marion?"

"Increased metabolism," she said unhesitatingly.

"Exactly. A rescue party was sent out. They found the corpses of a dozen old men and women in the valley, but no sign of what had killed them. There was no sign of a fog, nor of anything dangerous. Meanwhile, Locicault was luckily put into an isolation ward in the hospital. He ate tremendously. It was noticed that his skin emitted radiation. In the dark, his body actually shone."

Court lit a cigarette for a few abstracted puffs before continuing.

"His nurse caught the contagion," he said then. "She killed herself. Locicault is kept in utter isolation now, for there isn't a doctor or a nurse who dares get near him. When Dr. Granger wired me, I suggested lead insulation, so he could obtain this specimen for me to study. I want to see Locicault and make further experiments upon him."

Marion frowned. "You have other evidence, of course?"

"Naturally. Similar cases have been reported to me. This isn't anything new. Do you remember, about seven years ago, a newspaper story about a valley in France where the inhabitants were killed by a heavy fog? It was attributed to poison gas. Do you remember that West Indian island where life was wiped out overnight, without any explanation at all? People talked about volcanic gas. My files are full of apparently meaningless items like that. Freaks and sports born to animals and humans. So-called ghost stories about apparitions that shone in the dark. There are dozens of other examples."

The girl shuddered as she thought of the tag of flesh she had seen.

"And do you think this is the beginning of a plague?"

"My graphs and charts show an upward swing. These occurences happen more frequently as time goes on. Whatever causes them is growing more powerful."

"But what could cause such a thing?" the girl asked. "No virus could—"

"Not a virus. Filterable or not, they could not cause cellular radioactivity. This menace—this unknown X—is certainly not a virus. I don't know its nature, nor where it comes from. Till I know those factors, I can do nothing."

"Could it be a weapon of war?" Marion suggested.

"You mean— Well, scarcely! Once it's started, it's completely uncontrollable. X isn't man-made, for its record goes back too far for chemistry. It's a natural phenomenon, and our only clue is fog."

"A gas?"

Court nodded, and his eyes grew distant with thought.

"Where does it come from. Under the Earth? That's possible, of course, but hardly any of these cases have occurred in volcanic country. I think X comes from the interstellar void."

Marion's eyes widened in horrified realization.

"That's why you've been getting those observatory reports! Photographs and spectra."

Court grunted impatiently. "They showed nothing, and that's what I can't understand."

"Maybe the conditions aren't right," Marion suggested. "Phosphorescence isn't visible in daylight. Perhaps X isn't visible in space."

Court didn't move, but his fingers broke his cigarette in two.

"What was that?" he demanded, startled.

Before the girl could reply, he whistled sharply and turned to the window.

"Of course. A catalyst! Some element in our atmosphere makes X visible, and perhaps dangerous as well. In outer space it can't be seen, but when it comes in contact with some element in the air —I think you've got it, Marion!"

He stared grimly at the dark sky.

"Up there, yet it's invisible. Perhaps a cosmically huge cloud of it is drifting eternally through space. We're probably on the outer fringes, so we've touched only a few tiny, scattered wisps. When Earth plunges into the main body—"

Court lifted a clenched fist, furious because he was such a tiny, insignificant figure against the mighty concourse of the starry void.

"An element so alien that we can scarcely conceive of it! We can realize it exists only by seeing its effects on Earth. What is it? What physical laws govern that frightful matter? Or is it matter, as we know it?" He turned suddenly, his eyes hard and determined. "We're leaving for Canada. Charter a plane. I'll pack the equipment I will need."

Marion paused at the door.

"Mr. Court—" she began, and hesitated.

"Well?"

Somehow, though, she could find no words. In her mind was the picture of Court at the window, challenging the Universe. A champion of mankind, he had made a magnificent gesture.

But then Marion saw his cold, grim eyes. Reading the expression in them, her face whitened as she realized suddenly that Court cared nothing at all for mankind. His motives were passionlessly selfish.

He was not a champion. He was a scientist, cold, calculating, egocentric, challenging an opponent that threatened his existence.

Whatever she had meant to say died in her throat, just as something died in her heart. She went out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

V

IT WAS dark in the forest, though sunlight filtered down wanly through the branches. Truly the Earth had changed since Ardath had first set foot upon it.

He was not entirely pleased as he strode along, matching step with the gigantic Thordred. It did not seem to him that this world would be a suitable dwelling place. Thousands of years had passed since Ardath had taken Thordred from his home. Weary centuries had passed in ageless slumber, and a new civilization had risen. But somehow Ardath did not feel at home. He sensed a subtle strangeness in the very air about him.

He sighed a little wearily. His plans had gone amiss. The death of Zana, the Amazon queen, had taken him by surprise. He had hoped to retain her as a mate for Thordred, but without apparent cause, the woman's sleep had changed to death.

A fleeting suspicion of Thordred had passed through Ardath's mind, but he dismissed it. Though he had several poisons which might have caused such symptoms, Thordred could not possibly know of their existence nor how to use them. Not by a word or a thought had Thordred revealed that his brain held all the knowledge that previously had been Ardath's alone.

The two of them had set out to examine this new civilization, leaving the space ship safely hidden in the forest. They had captured two natives, learned their language by means of the thought-transference machine, and taken their clothing. With all memory of the encounter wiped from their minds by means of Ardath's strange science, the natives were released.

"They are puny folk today," Thor-

dred said, his savage face twisting into a grin as he shifted the toga about his broad shoulders. "These garments scarcely cover me."

"Our own garments might have caused comments," Ardath explained. "Let us hope that your size won't mark you for an alien."

Thordred spat in vicious contempt.

"I don't fear these weaklings. Why can I not carry a weapon, Lord?"

"I am armed," Ardath said quietly.

The huge Earthling did not answer. He had not wished to accompany Ardath on this expedition. If Thordred could have remained in the ship, he would have had free access to the laboratory. After that, there would be no need to fear Ardath or anyone else. But he had not dared object when his captor ordered him to follow.

The forest thinned and the two men came out into blinding sunlight. Starting at their feet, the ground sloped down to a broad, shallow basin, a valley where a city lay. To the north was the serrated horizon of mountain peaks. Apparently they were volcanoes, for smoke plumed up lazily from one and spread in a dark blot against the blue sky.

"This is their chief city," Ardath stated. "Remember, if anyone asks, we are farmers from the outer provinces."

Thordred nodded, grinning more broadly than before. A farmer! His mighty hands were accustomed to sword-hilts, not the handles of plows. But he had good reason not to argue.

The metropolis was unwalled. Several unpaved but well-trodden roads led into it, along which wains and wagons were creaking in and out. Most of the houses were of wood, some of stone, and a few of marble. Those built of marble were mostly temples.

Crowds filled the streets. There seemed to be two types of beings here. The roughly-clad, bronzed peasant class, walked or drove their wagons. The aristocracy were carried in palanquins. There were soldiers, too, armed horsemen who nevertheless seemed slight compared with Thordred's giant frame.

"Here," Ardath said, nodding toward a low doorway. "Taverns are good places to hear gossip."

They entered the inn, found themselves in a large room, broad and long, but low-raftered. The stench of wine and beer was choking. Lamps illuminated the darker corners. Crude tables were set here and there, at which men lounged, drinking, cursing and laughing. Two bearded seamen were throwing dice on the floor.

"We are thirsty," Ardath said to the waiter who appeared.

He did not drink from the wine-cup that was set before him. Thordred, however, drained his at a gulp, and shouted for more.

"You are strangers here?" the innkeeper asked.

HE TOOK the coins Ardath gave him —curious bronze disks engraved with a cross within a circle. They had come from the pockets of the two natives Ardath had captured.

"Yes. It is our first visit."

"You come to trade?"

"No," Ardath replied. "We are here to catch a glimpse of the woman whose fame has traveled even to the outer provinces. Men say that her beauty is blinding."

"So?" the landlord asked, his eyebrows lifting. "What is her name?"

"That I do not know," Ardath said. "But I can draw her features."

He took from his garments a stylus of his own devising and hastily sketched a face on the boards of the table. The likeness was so nearly photographic that the innkeeper instantly recognized it.

"By the Mountain, you are an artist! That's Jansaiya, the priestess. She's beautiful enough, or so men say, only you can't see her. The priestesses of Dagon never leave their temple, and men can worship only during the Sea Festival. Once a year, men gaze on Jansaiya as she serves the god. You have ten months to wait."

"I see," Ardath said, his face falling unhappily. "And where is this temple?"

Having learned the directions, they left the inn.

"Why do you wish to see this wench?" Thordred grunted.

"She is the wisest in this time," Ardath said. "I learned that before we landed here."

Hovering high over the land in his space ship, he had locatel Jansaiya with his ray device, and noted her high intelligence. The unexpected death of Zana the Amazon still rankled in him. He had determined to secure a substitute, and Jansaiya was the logical one. She would accompany Ardath and Thordred into Time, for he had decided not to remain in this civilization. It did not fulfill his requirements.

The two men reached the outskirts of the temple. As yet Ardath had not decided on any definite plan, knowing that first he must find the priestess.

"Wait here," he said. "Do not move away till I return."

The giant drew back in the shelter of a tree, watching Ardath cross the thoroughfare toward a gate where a soldier lounged on his spear.

The guard straightened, ready to challenge the Kyrian's entry into the city. Suddenly his eyes went blank and blind as they met Ardath's. Ordinary hypnotism worked well on these superstitious folk.

Ardath went through the gate. The bulk of a temple rose before him. Built of porphyry and onyx and rose marble, it seemed to rest on the sward as lightly as gossamer. Despite its hugeness, it had been constructed with an eye for proportion, so that it was utterly lovely, a symphony in stone. A curving stairway rose toward bronze gates that stood ajar, with a soldier on guard at each side.

Quietly Ardath went on. The guards did not move, once they had felt the impact of his gaze.

He entered the temple, found it vast, with a high-arched dome, and smoky with incense. The floor was green as the sea. Jade-green, too, was the flat-topped altar that loomed before him.

Behind the altar the sacred trident reared, and smoke coiled lazily about its prongs. A shaven headed, soft-faced priest turned to face Ardath.

"You have come to pay homage to Dagon," he said, rather than asked. "Where are your tributes? Do you come empty-handed?"

Ardath decided to change his tactics. He fixed his stare upon the priest, summoning all his will. The man hesitated, spoke a few thick words, and drew back.

"You—seem strange," he muttered. "Your form changes."

To the hypnotized priest it seemed as though a light mist had gathered about Ardath's body. It thickened and swirled, and suddenly where had been the figure of a man was something entirely different.

It was Dagon, the sea god, as the priest pictured him in his own imagination!

THE MAN went chalk-white. He collapsed on the floor, so paralyzed with fright and amazement that for a moment Ardath feared he had fainted.

"You know me," Ardath said softly.

"Great Master, forgive your servant—"

The priest babbled frantic incoherent prayers that sounded like gibberish.

"Bring the priestess, Jansaiya, to me," Ardath commanded.

"At once! At once!"

The man backed behind a tapestry and was gone. Ardath lifted ironic eyebrows, for this was altogether too easy. When he felt under his robe for certain weapons he had brought with him from the ship, he nodded. Hypnotism was a ticklish trick. It was undependable, whereas weapons were not.

But the priest returned, leading a veiled, slight, feminine figure. Both bowed to the floor.

Ardath lifted the girl to her feet. He pulled aside the veil, found that no de-

ception had been practised upon him. This was the priestess, the beautiful Jansaiya.

VI

WONDERFULLY lovely she was, with elfin, childlike features that somehow held a certain sophistication, and even a suggestion of inherent, latent cruelty. Her hair was bright gold, her eyes sea-green. Though she was as small as a nereid, her delicately symetrical figure was not in the least childlike.

She came closer to Ardath. Suddenly he felt a searing pain on his arm and drew away sharply.

"This is no god!" Jansaiya cried, her voice like tinkling silver bells. "Blood flows through his veins. He is human, and an impostor!"

She drew away, a small dagger still clenched in her hand. Ardath glanced wryly at the long scratch on his arm, yet he caught the quick stir of movement.

As though by magic, the temple was full of shaven-headed priests. From behind the tapestried walls they came swiftly, forming a ring about Ardath. Their steel swords glittered no less coldly than their eyes.

"We, too, know something of hypnotism," one of them rasped in contempt. "There are ways of testing even gods."

Ardath thought quickly. His foes were at least two score. Hypnotism would be useless now, but he had other weapons. Under his gown was a projector that would have slain every priest in the temple, if he had cared to use it.

He did not. Ardath's alien philosophy forbade the unnecesary taking of life. Instead, his hand, hidden in a fold of the toga, moved almost imperceptibly. A tiny crystalline sphere dropped to the green tiles of the floor and Ardath put his sandaled foot over it.

"Do you yield?" the leader of the priests asked.

Ardath smashed the globe with the sole of his shoe, holding his breath.

Instantly a colorless, odorless gas diffused through the temple. The priests no longer could move. Frozen statue like, they stood gripping their weapons and staring blindly straight ahead. The gas had a certain anesthetic quality which warped their time-sense and slowed down their reactions tremendously. To their slowed vision, it seemed as though Ardath vanished instantaneously when he stepped aside.

Hastily he looked around, still holding his breath. The temple was silent. No new enemy had appeared. Ardath wrenched a sword from a motionless priest and held it lightly in his right hand. He strode quickly to the priestess and lifted her under one arm. Ardath was no giant, but his muscles were steel-strong, and Jansaiya was light.

Carrying his captive, he hurried out of the temple.

The two guards at the gate had not moved. They remained passive as Ardath descended the stairs and went through the outer portal into the street. The sentry there was also motionless and silent.

But behind Ardath rose a clamor and an outcry.

Nowhere could huge Thordred be seen. He had not waited. Perhaps he had been taken prisoner.

Ardath's first step now was to return to the ship. After that, when the Kyrian gathered more resources, Thordred could be rescued. But at that moment there was no time for delay.

Bending low, Ardath ran along the street. The noise of pursuit followed close behind him, abruptly swelling to a thunder of iron hoofs. Down upon the Kyrian rode a horseman in glittering armor, sword lifted in menace. The bearded soldier shouted a searing curse. Out of the temple gates the priests poured.

"Slay him!" they yelled, as they raced after Ardath. "Slay him!"

Ardath had no time to employ any weapon but the sword that was bare in

his hand. He threw Jansaiya aside, out of danger. Quickly he reversed the blade, gripping it by the point. As the horseman thundered down, he flung the steel like a club.

The street exploded into a blinding blur of action. Ardath dodged aside as ringing hoofs clashed on the pavement. The soldier's sword screamed ominously through the air, but Ardath's missile had found its mark. Its heavy hilt had smashed against the horseman's bare forehead. The man was slumped in his saddle, unconscious. The weight of his sword had completed the slash.

Instantly Ardath was at the reins. He dragged the soldier down and sprang lightly into the saddle. He wheeled the mount. Reaching low over the side, he picked up Jansaiya and gently though swiftly put the limp figure across the saddle before him. The horse reared and charged down the street, scattering yelling priests before its thundering hoofs.

NEVER before had Ardath ridden a horse, nor even seen one of its kind. But eons ago, in the Miocene Age, he had studied the small, fleet Neohipparion. He instantly recognized the similarity between the modern and the prehistoric desert horse. Animals had never feared nor distrusted Ardath, for he understood them too well. The steed responded to the least touch of his hands and heels. Through the city it raced.

Three times Ardath had to use his sword, but only to disarm. It was not necessary to kill. Suddenly, then, the city was behind him, and he was racing up the slope toward the forest.

It was already late afternoon. The shadows lay long and dark on the sward. Ardath cast a glance behind him, saw that a horde of horsemen were riding hard in pursuit. He shrugged indifferently and looked down at Jansaiya.

Undisturbed, she still slept. He studied her face, realizing that it was lovely beyond imagination, though the perfect lips were somewhat arrogant, a little cruel. With his knowledge to combat those traits, he could make her a fit mate for any superior man.

But what had happened to Thordred? Ardath was beginning to grow worried. He could do nothing till he reached the ship, though.

It was sunset before he did. The Titanic sphere rose above the treetops as it lay cradled in a clearing. A port was wide open, just as he had left it, but across the gap shimmered a pallid curtain of white radiance.

Ardath reined in, sprang from the saddle. Snatching down Jansaiya in his arms, he called out sharply:

"Thordred!"

Instantly the giant came out of a thicket, his savage face inscrutable.

"Follow me," Ardath commanded briefly, and went toward the ship.

As he neared the port, the flickering curtain died. He entered, carrying his burden, and Thordred followed.

Ardath turned when they were all inside. The horse was quietly grazing where he had left it. When he heard the distant sound of shouting, constantly growing louder, Ardath sighed. He put Jansaiya down and closed the port. Seating himself without haste at the control panel, he sent the ship arrowing up from the forest.

The vessel hung in the air, hovering motionless. Ardath turned to Thordred.

"You tried to enter the ship," he said quietly. "I had forbidden that. Why did you try to do so?"

Thordred flushed, trying to evade that piercing though gentle stare.

"I came as far as the temple doors. When I saw the priests capture you, I thought you were helpless. I was unarmed, so I came back to the ship to find some weapon to aid you."

For a long, tense moment, Ardath's inscrutable gaze dwelt on the giant.

"No one can enter here save by my will," he said. "You would do well to obey me in future."

Thordred nodded hastily and changed the subject.

"The girl is awakening."

Jansaiya's green eyes slowly opened. The instant she saw Ardath, horror and hatred sprang into her gaze.

She looked then at the crafty Thordred. Suddenly and unmistakably, the giant Earthling realized that he had found an ally against Ardath. But he said nothing. He waited, silent and passive, while Ardath spoke to Jansaiya in her own language, explaining why she had been abducted.

She listened attentively, and the Kyrian knew she did not regard him as a god or a demon. Not for nothing had he sought out the most intelligent human of this particular time.

THE SUN was setting when Ardath finished his explanation. Through the transparent window of a port, they could see the land that stretched beneath them, green and beautiful. Smoke plumed up from the volcanic range. The city, tiny and white, lay in the distance.

"You intend to put me to sleep?" Jansaiya asked incredulously. "For a thousand years?"

"A thousand or more," Ardath said quietly. "Your civilization does not suit my needs. Do you love it so well that you would refuse?"

"No," she responded. "Return to be imprisoned in Dagon's temple once more? No, I am glad to be free! But to have to leave my world forever—"

"Kingdoms die," Ardath pointed out. "Civilizations pass like shadows. When we awake, perhaps no man will remember your land."

Jansaiya rose and went to the port. The red Sun cast bloody light on her face.

"You are wrong," she whispered. "I am your prisoner. I have no choice but to obey. Yet if we sleep for a hundred thousand years, men will not forget my kingdom. All over Earth our ships carry wondrous goods. Our civilization is the mightiest in the world. It cannot die or pass. It will go on, through the ages, growing mightier. Not even the gods can destroy this land. Not even Dagon, Lord of the Sea, can destroy Atlantis!"

VII

STEPHEN COURT left for Canada on the 2nd of January, 1941. His cabin plane contained two passengers and a good deal of equipment. Marion Barton went with him, and he had allowed Sammy to go along. The old man had been made over in every other respect, but wanderlust can be removed from a man only by the surgery of death.

"I won't be no trouble, Stevie," he had argued. "I get itchy feet this time of year, and besides, I never rode in an airplane. Anyhow"—his watery eyes had narrowed cunningly—"you'll need a handyman to do odd jobs. I can help you unpack and do other things."

To save argument that would waste time, Court had agreed. It was a clear, bitingly cold day when the plane took off from the Wisconsin flying field. Luckily the weather reports were good. Though there was no danger of snow, Court flew at low altitude, fearing that ice would form on the wings.

The excitement of hurtling the plane at high speed made him uncharacteristically talkative. His gaunt cheeks were flushed, and he chatted with the others with unusual animation and warmth. Sammy did not talk much, but he listened, and occasionaly asked a question.

"Plague, eh?" he said once. "I was in the South once when a plague hit. It was pretty awful. Kids and women—we couldn't bury 'em fast enough. I sure hope it ain't like that."

"We'll see," Court said. "I can't do much till I examine this fellow Locicault. For that matter—" He frowned, pondering. "I really haven't enough equipment with me. I've got to bring Locicault back to my lab."

"But you say it's contagious," Marion protested. "How can he travel?"

"I've arranged that. I'm having an ambulance made ready. It'll be plated

with several thicknesses of lead, which ought to make it safe enough. They're sending the car after me as soon as it's ready."

"Oh," Marion said.

She fell silent, watching the mountains and lakes glide past below.

"You know," Court observed after a time, "I came across an interesting angle, a completely unexpected one. I've been getting photographs from most of the observatories. While I found no trace of my X in space, I did notice something else—a satellite of some kind circling the Earth. No one's noticed it before, because it's so small and travels so fast. But it seems to be made of homogeneous metal."

"Iron?"

"Smooth metal, Marion. Not pitted and rough, as an asteroid would be. It's made of pure gold, or some yellow metal that resembles gold."

The girl looked sharply at Court.

"A space ship?"

"Possibly. But why wouldn't it come down, if it is a ship? Has it been circling the Earth for ages?"

"But where could it have come from?"

"Some ancient civilization might have mastered space travel, though I doubt that. If it *is* a space ship, it probably came from some other planet."

"There's nothing in history about it," Marion said. "If one space ship could come here, probably so would a lot more."

"Nothing in history? No, but there's a lot in mythology and folklore. I'm just guessing, of course. I'm anxious to find out more about that highly unnatural satellite."

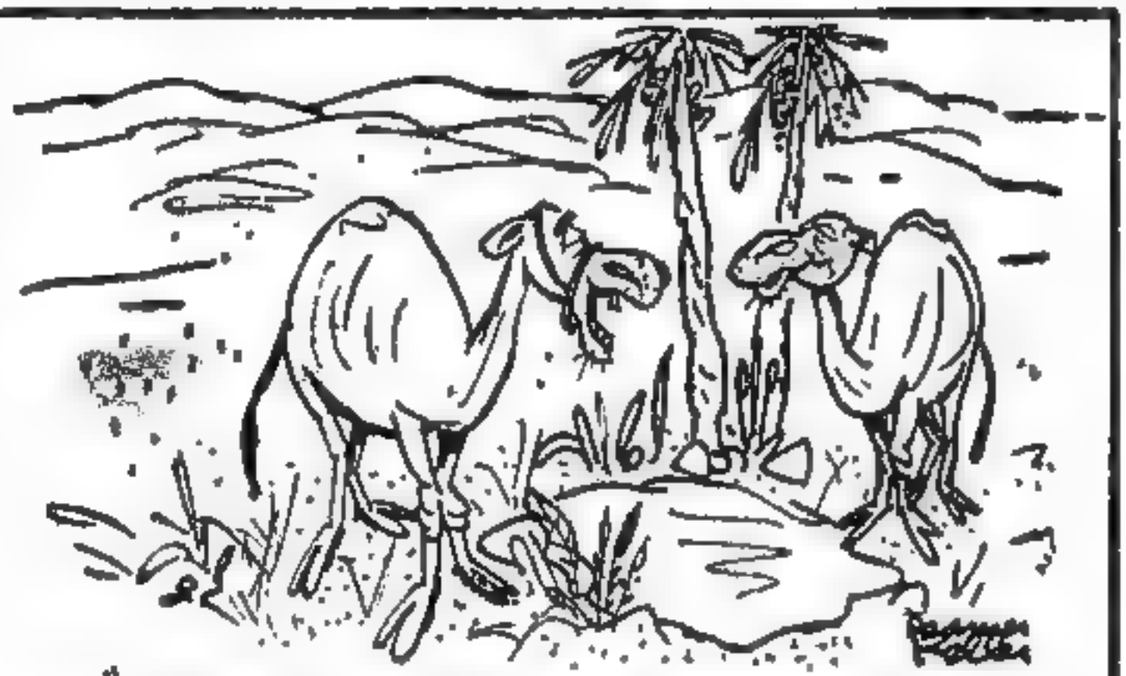
She was silent, fascinated by the thought.

"How can you reach it?" she finally asked.

"It looks impossible," he admitted. "Space travel is impossible to us today.

[*Turn page*]

"And now to my nephew, Eugene, I leave my bottle of Wildroot Cream-Oil, my hair's best friend!"



"Wildroot Cream-Oil relieves dryness so well, you only need a drink every fourteen days!"

"I'll bet 29¢ Wildroot Cream-Oil does it better!"

YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND

America's Favorite Hair Tonic!

That's one reason—You see, Marion, if it really is a space ship, it may mean Earth's salvation. To be completely rational, we must consider that perhaps the plague can't be conquered. If it is a space ship, we may be able to leave Earth and go to another planet. If those worlds are also in danger, we could leave the System. We couldn't do that with modern rocket fuels. Suppose that strangely colored satellite is a genuine space ship, one that has already traveled across the interstellar void. Repairing it would be less work than inventing one."

"It's worth trying," Marion breathed hopefully.

"I may fail. That's why I want to find out more about X. The space ship's a dangerously long chance, and I don't want to gamble everything on one throw of the dice. When I see Locicault—"

TIME wore on. Sammy asked innumerable questions about the plague, but when he exhausted his curiosity, he went to sleep. The plane sped over the border and into Canada.

It was afternoon before they reached the landing field. An automobile met them and took them into town, another following with Sammy and the equipment. At the hospital they were greeted by Dr. Granger, a shriveled gnome of a man with one tuft of white hair standing straight up from his bald skull.

"Court!" he said in relief. "Am I glad you're here! Are you hungry?"

"No." Characteristically Court did not bother to introduce anyone. "Where's the patient?"

"In the left wing of the hospital. We've cleared out everyone else. You'll have to put on the lead suit. We have only one, unfortunately."

Court seemed transformed into a swift, emotionless machine. He hastily donned the form-fitting suit of canvas, with leaden scales sewed closely over the surface. As he followed Granger to the door, the physician paused.

"I'd better not go farther. I don't know exactly how far the radiation extends. It wilts gold-leaf at quite some distance."

Court nodded, got his directions, and clumped ponderously out the door. He went along the corridor until he found the patient's room. Any other man would have hesitated before entering, but Court was not like any other man. Without stopping, he pushed open the door.

The bare, white-walled chamber was spotlessly sterile. A case of instruments lay open on a table, a hypodermic needle in view. On the bed a man was sprawled.

Peering through lead-infiltrated goggles, Court came closer. Locicault was unconscious. No, he was asleep. His spare, wasted frame had barely flesh enough to make a visible shape under the coverlets. On the pillow lay the withered, skull-face of an incredibly old man.

Locicault was twenty-three years of age.

His mouth was toothless. Hanging open helplessly, it revealed his ugly, blackened gums. His skull was hairless, with ears that were large and malformed, and his nose too, was enlarged. The repulsive skin dangled in loose, sagging wrinkles. Pouches hung slack on his naked skull.

Court went to the window and drew down the shades. In the gloom a queer, silvery light was visible at once. It came from the patient's face!

Court stripped off the covers, exposing Locicault's gaunt, nude body. Like the ghastly face, it gleamed with a silvery radiance that did not pulse or wane, but remained steady.

"Locicault," Court called out sharply.

When he gripped the thin shoulder, the man shuddered convulsively and his eyes opened.

They were not human eyes. They were pools of white radiance, like shining smoke in eye-sockets.

"Locicault, can you hear me?" Court asked quietly.

A cracked whisper came from the

withered lips of the Canadian.

"Yes— Yes, *m'sieu.*"

"Can you see me?"

"I can— No, *m'sieu,* not with my eyes. I am blind, but I can see you, somehow."

Court frowned, puzzled, as he pondered the weird reply.

"What do you see?"

"You are covered with—armor, I think, I do not know how I can tell this. I am blind."

"I am a doctor," Court said. "If you can talk without pain, I want you to answer some questions."

"Qui, m'sieu. Bien."

"Are you in pain?"

"No—yes. I am hungry. It is strange. I am hungry and thirsty, but I do not want food. Something I do not understand."

Court waited for him to continue. When Locicault did not, he went on with another line of reasoning.

"Tell me about this fog."

"There is not much to tell," Locicault said painfully. "When I left my home, I could not find my way. The fog was so heavy—and its smell was not right."

Stephen's eyes sparkled with interest under the thick mask.

"How did it smell? What did it remind you of?"

"I don't know. Wait! Once I was in the big power-house at the dam, and it smelled like that."

Ozone? Court shook his head.

"Well?" he urged.

"The fog was cold at first, and then it seemed to grow warmer. I had the strange feeling it was getting inside of me. My lungs began to burn like fire. My heart beat faster. I was hungry, yet I had just eaten—Doctor," Locicault said suddenly, without moving, "I am changing, more and more. When it started, I did not change much, but now —I feel like something that is not a man. Can you hear my voice?"

"Yes," Court soothed.

"That is odd. My mind is so wonderfully clear, but my senses—I do not seem to hear with my ears, nor speak with my tongue. I feel strong, though, and hungry—"

His scrawny head slumped, and Court saw that he had lost consciousness.

Whistling softly, with grim abstraction, Court returned to the main hospital where the others waited. Doffing his suit, he questioned Granger.

"It's progressive, isn't it? Doesn't the radiation get stronger?"

"Why, yes," the physician replied. "For a time, anyway. Locicault was fearfully hungry. His metabolism was high, and this radiation got stronger every time we fed him. Yesterday, though, he refused to eat."

"But he's hungry," Stephen protested.

"So he says, and still he won't eat. The radiation is much fainter now."

"I see," Court muttered. "Get me a guinea-pig, will you? A rabbit will do just as well, if you don't have a guinea-pig. I want to try something."

Putting on the armor again and carrying a wriggling guinea-pig, Court went back to the patient. Locicault was still unconscious. For the first time, Court hesitated, staring at the pale aura surrounding Locicault's body. Then he slowly extended the guinea-pig till its furry side touched the patient's hand.

Gently the weak, bony fingers constricted. Closing upon the tiny animal, they did not harm it though it struggled frantically to escape.

The little beast went limp, seemed, amazingly, to grow smaller. Swiftly the phosphorescent gleam surrounding Locicault grew brighter.

"So that's the way!" Court muttered under his breath.

He disengaged the guinea-pig from the skeleton fingers and examined the animal. It was dead, as he had expected. Court silently returned to the others.

"You haven't been feeding him the right way," he explained, struggling out of the armor. He gave it to Granger, who put it on. "Locicault is changing, slowly and steadily, into some form of life that is definitely not human. At

first he ate normally though in vast quantity. As his basic matter altered, Locicault lost the power to absorb food as we do, internally. He gets the energy direct—like a vampire, to put it melodramatically. He will kill any living being that touches him."

"Good God!" Granger cried in a shocked voice. "We can't let him live, Court!"

"We must, because I need him. I have to study the course of the plague in its natural progress. Locicault must be fed whatever he needs now—rabbits, guinea-pigs, and so on. I shall take him to my home as soon as the special ambulance gets here."

Sammy shuffled forward, wide-eyed with fear, but desperately stern.

"Stevie, don't take any chances."

Court ignored the old man as he ignored everyone else when his mind was absorbed.

"Marion, unpack my equipment. The ambulance should be here by tomorrow or the next day. In the meantime, I want to check every angle. Be sure that there's a supply of small animals for the patient. I don't know yet how much energy he needs, but he's broadcasting it at a terrific rate."

Granger, clumsy in the lead suit, left the room. Court looked at his watch.

"Lucky I got here in time. If Locicault had died—"

"Can you save him?" Marion asked eagerly.

"Of course not! I don't want to, even if I could. I want to stop the plague, and to do that, I must watch it run its course in a test subject. Locicault happens to be the only one we know about. There may be new cases at any time, but I can't afford to wait. For all I know, there may never be another case till the final crack-up. Then it will be too late to do anything."

"What do you intend?" Marion asked, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I shall take Locicault back home with me, keep him in isolation, and feed him whatever may be necessary. Eventually the plague will run its course. Locicault may not die, but he may have to be destroyed."

The door slammed open. Granger burst into the room, ripped off the lead suit. His gnomish face was gray with horror.

"Court, he's dead!"

"What?" Court's jaw trembled with indecision. "No, he can't be. It's unconsciousness—" But already he was snatching the suit from Granger. "Get me adrenalin, quick, another guinea-pig!"

They sprang to obey. Bearing his equipment, Court raced away. The minutes ticked slowly past, lagging unendurably. At last he came back, his shoulders slumped.

"You're right, Granger," he muttered. "Locicault's dead. I was too late."

"You—" the physician hesitated, biting his lips in helplessness—"you'll want to have an autopsy?"

"No, it's no use. I must watch the progress of the plague on a living being. A corpse is no good for my purposes. I must wait. Perhaps the plague will strike again. I—I don't know."

Court went to the window and looked out, his back to the others.

"Take precautions with the burial," he said after a time, speaking in a strange, tight voice. "The contagion can still be spread. No one must touch him without lead-armor. You will cremate him, of course."

Marion came across the room to stand beside him.

"You're not giving up, are you?" she whispered.

"No, but I'm at a dead end now. Every hour I delay may mean—"

The others had shuffled despondently out of the room.

"We're going back, then?" Marion asked.

"Yes. I'll take a few specimens from Locicault's body, but it's useless. I can't bring back life to a dead man. Damn him!" he snarled with sudden fury. "Why did he have to die?"

Marlon's lips trembled and she turned away. Court, after a brief hesitation, replaced the lead-glass helmet and went into the wing. He could, as a matter of routine, take samples of Locicault's blood and skin, though he knew that would do little good.

Court opened the door of Locicault's room and stopped abruptly, catching his breath. The blood drained from his cheeks. He reached out almost blindly.

"Sammy!" he whispered. "Oh, my God, you fool!"

The old man stood motionless beside the bed. In the dimness his face could not be seen. His scant white hair was as pale as silver.

"Hello, Stevie," he said gently. "Don't go off the handle, now. After all, I'm not so young any more, and you needed a case of this plague to experiment on. If it's as contagious as you say, I guess I sure enough got it by now."

"Sammy," Court whispered through dry lips. "Why—" He could not go on.

"Why?" The old man shrugged. "I dunno. I told you about that plague down South, with women and kids dying like flies. I know what it's like. If I can help you save women and kids, Stevie, I figure I've done a pretty good job. So it's up to you now, boy. It's up to you."

VIII

ARDATH was worried. As he sat immersed in thought, within the laboratory of the golden ship, he felt that he was little nearer to his goal. The barbaric hordes that overran Earth in this new era promised little. Only in the far Eastern lands did the flame of civilization burn.

But would Ardath find a super-mentality there? Would there be one he could take with him to a future age, to find a suitable mate? Or must he go on once more?

There was another matter, too. Neither Jansaiya nor Thordred had proved as intelligent as he had expected. At times Thordred was almost obtuse, despite his eagerness to learn new things. A flash of suspicion crossed Ardath's mind. Perhaps Thordred was pretending stupidity.

But why should he? Ardath, unused to guile and deceit, found the question difficult. He had saved Thordred's life, but humans were completely alien to Ardath. He had come from Kyria, a planet far across the Universe. He did not realize that humans sometimes mistrust and hate those greater than themselves, fearing power which, though benevolent, can also be used for evil. Besides, he knew that Thordred was ambitious, for the giant Earthman had conspired to win Zana's throne.

Ardath rose from his seat and pressed a lever. The veil of flickering light that barred the doorway died. He stepped across the threshold, and once more the barrier flamed with shimmering deadliness. He stood watching Thordred and Jansaiya as they sat near a vision screen, intent on the scene pictured there.

Thordred turned his vulture face, sensing Ardath's presence. "There is nothing new, Master."

Ardath smiled somewhat sadly.

"How often must I tell you not to call me master? Because I have more knowledge than you, Thordred, does not mean that you are my slave. This eternal desire of Earthmen for enslavement—"

He shrugged bewilderedly and his thoughts went back to his home planet, Kyria, long since shattered into cosmic dust. Often he had dreamed of that world, which he had seen only on vision screen. Always he had awakened to this barbarous planet where men hated and fought and died for silly causes. Truly the road of the ages was long.

Yet he knew there would be an end. Even here, in this Eastern land, the Kyrian had found a clue.

"Thordred," he said slowly, "and you, too, Jansaiya—I must leave you for a while."

Intent on his thoughts, Ardath did not notice the quick glow that brightened the eyes of the others.

"There is a man here I must know, and a mystery I must solve," he continued. "Barbarous hordes have overrun this country, huge hairy giants from the North. They are little more than beasts, but at their head is a chieftain called Dro-Ghir. He puzzles me. His acts are wise. His brain seems highly developed, yet he is filled with the violent emotions of a savage. This is a paradox."

Jansaiya's lovely eyes were narrowed.

"You must leave us, you said?"

Ardath nodded. "Remain in the ship till I return. There is plenty of food, and no danger can touch you. I have only one warning—do not attempt to enter the laboratory." He smiled as a thought came to him. "Though you know nothing of the apparatus there, yet you might harm yourselves."

"We will obey," Thordred grunted, his harsh face immobile.

Quickly Ardath made his preparations. As he opened the port, he turned. His gaze dwelt on Thordred, and there was a curiously mocking light in it.

"Farewell, for a time. I shall rejoin you soon."

He stepped out and was gone.

The girl made a quick movement, but Thordred lifted his huge hand in warning.

"Wait!" he whispered.

THEY waited, while the minutes dragged past. At last Thordred arose and went to the laboratory door. He fumbled over the wall, and abruptly the flickering veil of light died. The giant's face twisted in a contemptuous grin.

"Ardath is a fool," he rumbled. "Else he would never have left his laboratory unguarded, even though he does not realize that I know the secret of his brain."

"But do you?" Jansaiya asked. She stood behind the giant, peering over his shoulder into the laboratory. "You know nothing of his thoughts since you drew the knowledge from his mind, and that was ages ago."

"I know enough!" Thordred retorted, eyeing the apparatus wolfishly. "Enough to handle his weapons, once I get my hands on them. We shall follow Ardath now and slay him. Then this new world will be ready for conquests."

"I am afraid," the girl complained. "Do not try to kill Ardath. Sometimes I see that in his eyes which makes me tremble. He is not Earth-born. Let us flee, instead.

"While he lives, we are not safe," Thordred growled. "Come!"

He sprang across the threshold—and was flung back! A wall of flaming blue light reared viciously before him. Crackling, humming, blazing with azure fury, the strange veil rippled weirdly. Sick with amazement and baffled rage, Thordred drew back, a stinging pain in his arm and his side. Jansaiya cried out and fled into a corner.

"He—he watches us!" the girl whimpered. "I did not think so, but now I know he is a demon!"

Thordred was ashly-gray under his hairy brown skin. His jaw muscles bunched. Like a beast he crouched, great hands shaking, as he glared at the ominous portal.

"Quiet! He does not watch. Ardath is clever, that is all."

"I do not understand."

"One lock on a door is good, but two are better. Ardath had put two locks on this one." Thordred growled deep in his throat. "Does he suspect me? If he does—" He shook his shaggy head. "No, it is a precaution anyone might take. Let me see."

Thordred approached and gingerly tested the blue wall of light. It was as solid and resistant as metal.

"It is a new thing. I know many of Ardath's secrets, though not this one. Perhaps I can learn how to destroy this barrier before he returns."

Jansaiya began trembling with a new fear.

"If you do not, he may destroy us. Hurry, Thordred!"

"There is no need for haste. Let me see—"

The giant began testing the wall beside the door. Under his beetling brows, the amber cat's-eyes glowed as he worked. Presently sweat began to trickle down the swarthy face and run into the black beard. Could he find the secret of the barrier of light before Ardath returned?

Meanwhile, Ardath walked swiftly through the forest, his thoughts busy. The Kyrian had already forgotten Thordred and Jansaiya. He was pondering the mystery of the savage chief, Dro-Ghir, whose actions were those of a genius, but who certainly did not resemble one in any way.

In a far later age, Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun would ravage the Earth as Dro-Ghir did now. Centuries later, the walled cities of China would again fall victim to the invader, as they had fallen before Dro-Ghir. Out of the Northern steppes the hordes of this scourge had come, huge hairy men on horseback. Their villages were crude collections of dome-shaped huts—*yurts*, they were called.

Eastward the ravagers had swept, and down the bleak coasts into Oriental lands. Westward they had been halted, for a time, by the vast mountain range that towered to the skies. In the south they had swarmed into a land of lush green jungle and carved stone temples, where men worshiped Siva and Kali the Many-armed.

Like an avalanche, the hoofs of the invaders thundered unimpeded across Earth.

"Slay" they shouted.

Their curved swords glittered. Their horse-tail standards shook in the chill winds that followed them from the north. Their spears drank deep, lifted, dripping red! Great beast-faced giants who rode like centaurs and fought like devils, they bathed the East in rivers of blood.

SLAY! Show no mercy. Prisoners mutter and revolt, therefore take no prisoners. Only slay!

Over these barbarians Dro-Ghir ruled.

Ardath's vision screen had shown him that Dro-Ghir camped with a group of his men, not far away. But night had fallen before he reached the outposts and was accosted by a wary sentry.

In the moonlight, the guard's face was like that of a gargoyle. He lifted his spear—and held it rigid as Ardath's gaze met and locked with his. A silent conflict flared without words or actions between the two men.

As the stronger will mastered, the sentry turned and led the Kyrian into the midst of a group of goat-skin tents. Before the largest he paused. A few soldiers were sitting here and there by their fires. They looked up curiously, but none offered to interfere.

The sentry lifted the tent flap and Ardath entered. He felt an involuntary tension as he faced Dro-Ghir.

A few small lamps of pottery, with wicks protruding from reeking animal oil, cast a flickering yellowish gleam on the tent walls. There were some beast skins scattered around haphazardly, but nothing more. A man reclined at length on a greasy fur, and he looked up sharply as the intruder entered.

Dro-Ghir was a giant, as huge as Thordred. He wore nothing but a loose robe, which left his shaggy breast bare. His thick black beard was shiny with oil. His long, thick mustache had been twisted into two short braids and tied with golden wire. A fur cap covered his head. His face was that of a blindly ferocious beast. The low brow slanted back. The thick lips revealed yellow, broken tusks. In the shallow eyes was little sign of intelligence.

Ardath frowned in wonder. Was this the genius he sought?

Dro-Ghir surged up in one swift motion. His hand brought out a short throwing-spear, which he leveled at Ardath.

"Li Yang" he roared. "Come here!"

Ardath had already taken pains to learn the language of the barbarian hordes.

"I mean no harm," he began. "I merely—"

"Peace, Lord," a new voice broke in. "He comes unarmed. Wait!"

Someone was crouching in the shadows. Ardath peered intently into the darkness. He saw a gross lump of a man, an absurdly fat Oriental who sat cross-legged in the gloom. Sharp black eyes, almost hidden in the sagging pads of the round bland face, stared back at Ardath. The red lips were childlike, and the domelike skull was bald and shining. Li Yang wore a loose robe, girt about his bulging waist by a golden cord.

Dro-Ghir had also swiveled to peer at the Oriental.

"Hear his words," Li Yang counseled, and picked up a lutelike instrument at his side. Idly he strummed the strings as he gave his advice. "There is no harm in words."

But Dro-Ghir did not release his grip on the spear. He stood with legs wide apart, watching Ardath.

"Well?" he demanded.

The Kyrian spread his hand in appeal.

"I come in peace."

"How did you get through the lines?"

"That does not matter. I have a message for you."

Dro-Ghir growled a savage threat deep in his throat.

"Let him speak, Lord," Li Yang whispered.

"Then speak—but swiftly!"

Swiftly Ardath told his story. He was still puzzled, and he grew more bewildered as he searched the dull, ferocious eyes of the chieftain. No understanding woke in them, yet Ardath plunged on, explaining his purpose, asking Dro-Ghir to come with him into time.

Finally he finished. There was tense silence as the lamps sputtered and flickered eerily. At last the soft twang of the lute murmured vaguely.

"What is your answer?" Ardath asked.

Dro-Ghir tugged at his beard, while his hand was still clenched about the spear. Abruptly the Oriental broke in.

"Lord, I think this foreigner has strange powers. It would be well to make him welcome."

THE ORIENTAL heaved to his feet from the furs, a flabby behemoth, and the pudgy hand made a swift motion to Dro-Ghir. The chieftain hesitated. Then his face broke into a wolfish grin.

"Good. We are not enemies, you and I. Break bread with me."

Li Yang shuffled ponderously forward, thrust a cake of mealy, unleavened bread into Dro-Ghir's paw. The chieftain broke the cake into halves and handed Ardath one, stuffing the other into his capacious mouth. The crumbs that fell were caught in his filthy beard.

Warily the Kyrian ate. Something was amiss here, though what it was, he did not know.

"You will come with me?" he asked. "I am tired of using force. If you refuse, I shall merely leave you and continue my search."

"Drink!" Dro-Ghir roared.

He seized a hollowed horn from Li Yang and thrust it at Ardath. The Oriental gave Dro-Ghir another cup. The wine was hotly spiced and steaming.

"In friendship—drink!"

The barbarian chief lifted the horn to his lips and drained it. Ardath followed his example. Slowly he lowered the cup.

Li Yang was back in his corner, strumming at the lute. His voice rose in a monotonous Oriental song:

> All men see the petals of the rose drift down,
> The jasmine fades, the lotus passes—

Dro-Ghir stood motionless. Abruptly his huge hand tightened on the drinking-horn, and it shattered.

His hair-fringed mouth gaped open

in agony. Only a choking snarl rasped out.

But no man sees his own doom in the falling of the rose.

The chieftain's body arched back. He clawed at his throat, his contorted face blindly upturned. Then he crashed down, as a tree falls, and lay silent on a dirty bear fur. A single shudder shook the gross form, before Dro-Ghir was utterly still.

Ardath caught his breath.

His glance probed the Oriental's sharp black eyes as Li Yang stood up hurriedly.

"We must go before Dro-Ghir's body is found. Most of the men are in a drunken stupor, as always after a victory. Hurry!"

"Wait," Ardath protested. "I do not understand."

The Oriental's bland face was immobile, but his black eyes twinkled with malicious amusement.

"Dro-Ghir signaled me to give you the poisoned cup. I gave him the deadly wine, instead. Listen, Ardath—that is your name, I think. Your words were not for this barbarian chief. Ever since Dro-Ghir captured me, years ago, I have served him with my wisdom. He spared me because I gave him good counsel."

Ardath's eyes widened, startled by the simple explanation. Li Yang had been the power behind Dro-Ghir's throne.

The Oriental was the genius who had inspired the invader!

"I am tired of being a slave," said Li Yang frankly. "Eventually Dro-Ghir would have doubted my wisdom, and would have slain me. Also, I do not like this savage world. Let me go with you, Ardath, into the future"—he glanced at the grease-stained furs—"where, at least, there may be more comfortable couches."

Involuntarily Ardath's solemn face relaxed in a gentle smile. He could not help liking this blandly frank Oriental, who played soft music with one hand while he administered poison with the other.

"Very well," he agreed. "Let us go. What of the guards? Can we pass through their lines?"

"Unless Dro-Ghir's body is discovered. In that case, not even I will be above suspicion, so we must hurry."

The two slipped quietly from the tent and under a swollen red moon they walked through the encampent. Only when the fires had grown dim behind them did they breathe freely once more.

LI YANG pointed up to the smoke from the camp that drifted across Earth's satellite.

"Barbarian flames darken the Moon-lantern," he said softly. "In future ages, the smoke may have drifted away. Not for many centuries, though, I think."

Ardath did not answer, for he was concentrating on the brain of the man who walked beside him. Presently he sighed with an emotion that was close to despair.

His quest was not over. Li Yang was wise, far ahead of his time in intelligence, but he was not the super-being Ardath sought. The search must still go on through the eons. But Li Yang would be a good companion to have, despite his shortcomings.

After a while, they came in sight of the ship.

The Oriental's lips quivered, though his face remained immobile.

"The chariot actually flies?" he asked in awe. "It is truly wonderful, like the fabled dragon of Sti-Shan."

On the threshold of the golden ship Ardath paused a moment. His gaze went to the blue curtain that flickered across the laboratory door. Then he looked sharply at Thordred and Jansaiya, who were rising from their couches.

Jansaiya's elfin features betrayed nothing, though there was a hint of fear in the sea-green eyes. Thordred's beard bristled with apparent indignation.

"It is time you returned!" he growled. "Look!" He pointed toward the laboratory. Silently Ardath entered, Li Yang at his heels. Ignoring their apparent interest in the Oriental, he lifted his brows in a question.

"Enemies," Thordred grunted, his yellow eyes angry. "They came from the forest. I—" he looked away involuntarily —"I opened the door, which was wrong, I admit. But I was curious."

"Go on," Ardath ordered unemotionally.

"Well, the babarians saw us. They came toward the ship, yelling and hurling spears. I shut the port and barred it, but they hammered so hard on the metal I feared they'd break through."

"No spear can pierce the hull," Ardath replied quietly.

"Jansaiya was frightened, and I was weaponless. I thought I could find a weapon in your laboratory. But when I tried to enter—" He made a quick, angry gesture toward the threshold. "You do not trust us, I see."

"You are wrong." Ardath smiled suddenly. "I take precautions against possible enemies, but you are not my enemy, Thordred. The barbarians fled?"

"They gave up at last," Thordred blurted hurriedly. "But if they had broken in, we would have been slaughtered like trapped beasts."

Ardath shrugged indifferently.

"It should be forgotten. We have a new companion. And soon we must sleep again for centuries."

Thordred said nothing. His eyes were veiled, but slow rage mounted within him. Again he had failed. Not completely, though. He had not betrayed himself, and as yet Ardath suspected nothing.

They must sleep again, yet they would awaken.

Thordred's fist clenched. The next time, he would not fail!

IX

THE SCIENTIST, Stephen Court, was in his Wisconsin laboratory-home. With Marion and Sammy, he had returned from Canada and plunged immediately into a desperate succession of experiments. Slowly, painfully, he made progress.

"We have two goals," he told Marion, his dark eyes gleaming behind lids that were red from lack of sleep. "First—"

"First you've got to eat something," the girl interrupted.

She brought a tray to Court's desk and set it down. Silently he nodded his thanks. Wolfing a sandwich without tasting it, he kept on talking.

"Remember what I told you about seeing a golden space ship on an orbit around the Earth? I've been checking that. I have a hunch there's some clue connected with that ship."

"How do you figure that out?"

Marion perched on a corner of the desk, her trim legs swinging under the lab smock she wore.

"The ship was obviously created by some civilization far in advance of ours. That means their science was also in advance of today's. Perhaps in that vessel I can find some weapon, some method unknown to modern science, that will help me fight the plague. The very least it can do is set me on the right track."

Marion patted her dark hair into place, though she boasted that she had lost all the silly feminine habits.

"How can you reach the ship? Space travel is impossible."

Court smiled. "It was impossible. Rockets are useless as yet, because the fuel problem's insurmountable. Balloons aren't practical. But there is a way of overcoming gravitation."

"Good Lord!" The girl slid down from the desk and stood staring. "You don't mean—"

"Hold on. I haven't done anything yet, except make some spectroscopic analyses. Marion, that space ship isn't made of gold! It's a yellow metal, an unknown alloy. I haven't finished analyzing it, but I know there's magnesium there, tungsten, and other ele-

ments. The virtue of that alloy is that, properly magnetized, it becomes resistant to gravitation."

"How?" she asked, amazed.

Court tapped idly on the tray as he replied.

"I'm just theorizing, though I feel pretty certain. Earth is a gigantic magnet. You know that. Well, like poles repel, opposite poles attract. If we could set up a magnetic force absolutely identical to Earth's, we could utilize that principle. So far it hasn't been done, except by the unknowns who built that golden ship. If I can duplicate the alloy —which I think I can do—and shoot the right sort of energy into it, we'll have a space ship."

"Whew!" Marion breathed, and she blinked. "Then you'll go out after—"

"The golden vessel? Yes. It may be a wild goose chase, for all I know, but the chance is worth taking. I may find scientific knowledge that will be just what I need."

The girl turned away with such haste that Court looked at her sharply.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She shook her head speechlessly. Court got up swiftly and swung her around to face him. There were tears in her lovely brown eyes.

"Tell me what it is!" he commanded. "What's wrong?"

She bit her lip. "You'll think I'm foolish."

"I said, tell me what it is!"

"I'm just superstitious," Marion burst out. "It isn't scientific at all. But for a minute I had the queerest feeling that—"

"Well?" he said impatiently, frowning and gripping her shoulders.

"That there's danger in that ship," she whispered. "Danger to you, Stephen. As though that golden ship had been waiting for ages, perhaps, just for the moment when you'd enter it."

He grinned ironically and sat down again. Gulping milk, he watched Marion laughingly over the rim of the glass.

"A sort of ancient rendezvous," he teased. "You're under a nervous tension, Marion. We all are." He admitted that, sobering. "And there's a reason enough, I'm afraid."

They fell painfully silent. Both were thinking of the man who lay alone in a lead-plated room upstairs. Sammy was already being ravaged by the frightful plague from outer space. Court got up, squaring his shoulders with decision.

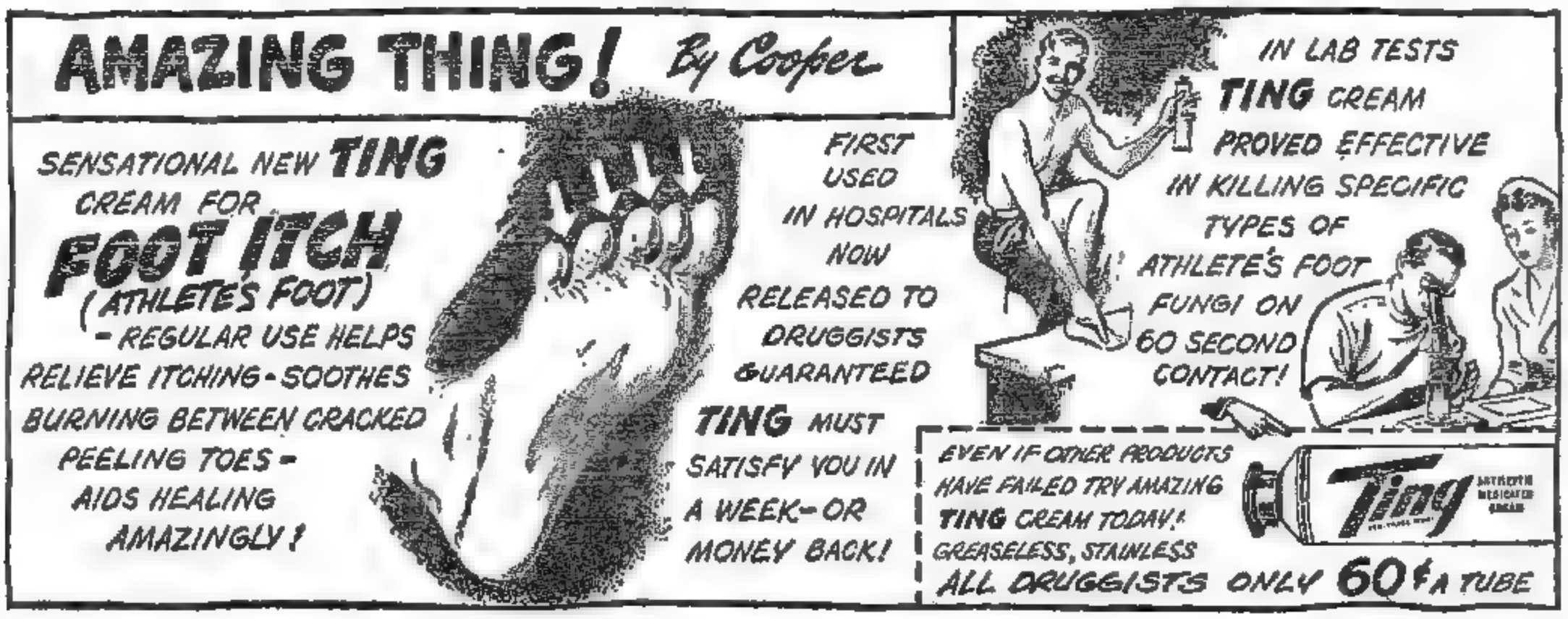
"He didn't back down, you know, and I certainly won't run from a shadow. Get my suit, Marion. It's time to check up on Sammy again."

NERVOUSLY she helped Court don the armor.

"There's something going on at the village," she said. "Not a—a shadow, either. Since the plague has hit the newspapers, the villagers are frightened."

"Why?" Court asked, slipping on his

[*Turn page*]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gloves. "There's been only one case in this country as yet, and that was in Georgia. Europe, Africa, China? Sure. But—"

"Somebody's been talking. They know about Sammy. They claim that you're exposing the whole village to deadly danger by keeping Sammy here."

"Damned idiots!" He made an impatient gesture with his lead-gauntleted hand. "Sammy's completely isolated. There's no danger at all."

"They're not scientists," she argued. "Just ordinary people, most of them fairly uneducated. But they've got families, and—well, I'm afraid."

"The police can't touch me."

"It's not that." Marion bit her lip and paused. Then she shrugged. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. But I hope nothing happens."

"Nothing will," he assured her.

He went out, hurrying through a long corridor to a lead-plated door. When he knocked, there was no response. Making sure there were no gaps in his armor, Court entered the experimental room.

It was large, yet amazingly cluttered with apparatus. The lead walls dully reflected the dim light. On white-topped tables by the hospital bed lay gages, indicators, and enigmatic-looking devices.

The figure on the bed was completely unrecognizable. The metamorphosis had come so swiftly that Sammy was horribly inhuman in appearance. His skin emitted a silvery radiance. His face was a mere bag of loosely wrinkled skin, hanging repulsively about the jutting nose. His mouth was invisible below eyes that were gleaming but blind.

Court fought down the sick horror that tore at his stomach. He dared not give way to sentiment, nor even admit its existence. Before him was a test case, a laboratory subject. That was all. He must forget that he had ever known the old man, that the faithful regenerated tramp had been his only friend, his entire family.

"Hello, Sammy," he said in a voice that would not lose its choked quality. "How do you feel?"

There was no motion perceptible in the shrunken body on the bed. But a remarkably clear voice murmured a reply.

"Hello, Stevie."

"Any change?"

"None. I'm just hungry."

Court took a rabbit from a lead-lined box beside the bed, and placed it gently in the malformed talons that once had been Sammy's hand. Instantly there was a change. The small beast kicked convulsively and was still. The glow emanating from Sammy's skin brightened slightly.

"That better?"

"Yes. Thanks, Stevie."

Court drew up a chair and clumsily sat down in it. Through the lead infiltrated goggles, his eyes probed. With gloved fingers he made adjustments on the apparatus, and carefully checked the readings on certain gages.

"The change is progressive," he muttered under his breath.

Drawing a microscope toward him, he took a sample of the patient's skin cells and prepared a slide.

"Yes, entropy . . . Incredible! I still can't understand—"

"What is it, Steve?" Sammy asked weakly.

"Nothing new. But I'll find a cure yet. You can depend on me, Sammy."

The hideous folds of wrinkles twitched in a ghastly semblance of amusement.

"Your cure won't help me. I'm hungry again."

Court gave the old man another rabbit. Then he took pencil and paper, set a stop-watch on the table, and began the usual word association test. Though simple, it had proved surprisingly effective in checking on the patient's mental metamorphosis.

But now Court was due for a surprise. The test proceeded normally. Sammy responded without much hesitation, though over two words—"man"

and "life"—he paused perceptibly. Then Court said, "Food," and immediately Sammy responded, "Human."

Court made a great effort to control himself. He read the next word, and the next, but he did not even hear Sammy's responses. He was battling down the gorge that rose in his throat, yet this should have been expected. Sammy was absorbing life-energy from living beings, and the human brain contained the highest form of such energy. But what would be the result?

SAMMY'S replies lagged as he seemed to grow weaker. Court left him at last, with a few encouraging words. But when he hurried out, he was feeling worried and depressed.

It was past sunset, and he switched on the light in his lab. Removing the lead armor, he sat down to think matters over. Sammy was no longer entirely human, for the change was progressing rapidly. His basal metabolism was tremendously increased. As Court had discovered, the very matter of his body was changed.

"Entropy," he whispered, nervously folding and unfolding his hands. "That's the answer, of course. But what it means—"

Entropy, the rate of the universe's running down. A human body is composed of atoms and electrons, like a universe. If the entropic value of a life organism is increased, what is the result?

Court was angry with himself because he did not know. He should have been grateful for not being able to see the future.

"Sammy's changing into another form of life, that's certain. And he absorbs energy directly through contact. I must take more precautions. He may be dangerous later."

Abruptly there was an interruption. The door flew open, and Marion burst in. Her brown hair was in disorder under her white cap.

"Stephen!" she cried through pallid lips. "There are men coming up the road!"

"What about it?" he asked, without interest.

"From the village. With torches. I'm afraid—"

"Those damned fools!" he snapped angrily. "Rouse out the men. Give them rifles. Tell them to spread through the house and keep its front covered from inside. When I give the word, they can fire."

Marion stared at him in horror.

"You'd—murder those men?"

Court's eyes were icy as he returned her stricken gaze.

"Why not? They're afraid I have a contagious case here. But they're afraid for their own precious skins. They'd be willing to burn down the house and kill Sammy. Well, it's lucky I've taken precautions. Do what I say!"

His tone sent Marion racing out.

Growling an oath, Court went to the front door. He opened it and stepped out on the front porch. A bright moon revealed the scene. Before him the road sloped steeply down to the village, with a few trees that were blots of shadow on either side.

Torches flamed along the road. Twenty-five or thirty men—possibly more—were advancing in ominous silence.

Court put his back against the door and waited. The ignorant fools! He was trying to save their lives.

Quickly the mob formed a crescent about the porch. They were mostly villagers and farmers. Under other circumstances, they would have dreamed and worked away their lives without ever embarking on such a hazardous venture as this. But now their work-worn faces were grim, and their sharp eyes narrowed with deadly purpose.

Court unfolded his arms. Though he held no weapon, the mob drew back slightly. Then one man, a lean, grizzle-haired oldster in overalls, stepped forward.

"What do you want?" Court asked quietly.

The old man scowled.

"We want some questions answered, Mr. Court. Are you harborin' a case of the Plague?"

"Yes."

The word was flatly emotionless, yet a mutter went up from the crowd.

"I s'pose you know that's contagious. There can't nothin' stop it."

"There is no danger of contagion," Court replied. "I have taken care of that." He gestured at the flickering flames of the torches. "What do you wish to do—kill my patient?"

"Nope," the spokesman stated. "We want you to send him away from here, to a hospital. The papers say there ain't no way of stopping the Plague. I got two kids myself, Mr. Court. The rest of us, we're family men. How'd you like it if—"

"I tell you, there's no danger," Court snapped. His nerves, already tense with overwork and sleeplessness, were frayed beyond endurance. "Get out, all of you, or you'll regret it!"

A LOW ominous roar went up from the mob. They surged forward, paused only when Court lifted his hand.

"Wait! I have a dozen men in the house, stationed at the windows, with guns aimed at you right now. Submachine-guns, some of them, and rifles. We can protect ourselves from lynch law."

The crowd wavered uncertainly. The oldster yelled a shrill protest. "We ain't lynchers, Mr. Court. We're just aimin' to protect our folks. We got a car down the road a bit, and we aim to take your Plague victim to a hospital."

Court laughed ironically.

"You poor idiot! You just said the Plague is contagious."

"Sure it is. But we got rubber gloves, and cotton pads soaked in antiseptic to tie over our mouths and we'll wash in carbolic afterward. We just don't want our folks to run any risks."

"Rubber gloves!" Court snorted. "Only thick lead can protect you from the Plague. If you won't leave instantly, we'll use guns to convince you. And I warn you, I won't hesitate to do that if it's necessary."

"He ain't bluffing," one of the mob said nervously. "I saw a muzzle up there in that winder."

"Don't worry about it," the spokesman said. "We're comin' in, Mr. Court, unless you bring the man out to us."

As the crowd surged forward, Court raised his pistol and took steady aim at the leader.

"You set foot on the first step," he gritted, "and I'll put a bullet through your head."

The old man walked slowly, quietly, up the steps. Behind him came the others. Court's finger tightened on the trigger, yet he did not fire.

His face grew terrible at the conflict that raged within him. Stephen Court, man of ice and iron, torn by puerile emotion? Shoot! That was the logical thing to do. Shoot, to save Sammy, to save the experiment from these ignorant fools.

But the mob did not want to kill. Court knew they were honest, hard-working men, who loved their families and wanted to protect them from danger.

The nearest was only a few steps from him. But Court did not fire, nor give the word that would have brought a searing blast from the upper windows. His lips twisted in agonized indecision.

From within the house came a scream. The door flung open and Marion Barton fled out, her face chalk-white.

"Stephen! Quick!"

Court whirled, ignoring the besiegers.

"What is it?"

"Sammy came into the lab! He was—"

A startled gasp came from the old man. He drew back, staring. A rippling wave of fear shook the crowd that had shuffled to the porch. With one arm around Marion, Court dragged her back. Just then, something came out of the door.

He knew it was Sammy. But the

metamorphosis had been incredibly accelerated. Sammy was not even as human as he had been half an hour before.

His body could not be seen. A white shadow, with flickering nimbus edges, paused on the threshold. The pallid glow emanating from Sammy's flesh had become so brilliant that its lambent light entirely hid the frightful body.

Staring at him was like looking into the heart of an electric light bulb, though the illumination was not strong enough to be blinding.

A shining, roughly man-shaped shadow, it stood on the threshold. And it whispered! A vague, wordless, susurrus murmured out. Like the hum emitted by some electric contrivance, it was enigmatic and unhuman.

The shadow lurched forward. Its shimmering arms went around the old man in overalls. The old fellow shrieked as though the soul had been wrenched from his body. Then he fell, his body oddly shrunken, pale and lifeless.

Panic struck the mob. In all directions the men fled back. The thing that had been Sammy seemed to glide down the steps in pursuit.

"Oh, my God!" Court whispered. His face was drawn with pain as he slowly took aim with his pistol. "Sammy—"

He did not finish. The shot snarled out in the night.

The glowing bulk was unharmed. With his breath catching in his throat, Court pumped bullet after bullet at it. It stumbled down the lawn, while the mob vanished along the slope.

"No use!" Court gritted between his teeth. "It absorbs every kind of energy, including kinetic."

He let out a shout. Glancing up, he pointed. From the windows above him came a burst of sound. Submachine-guns and rifles rattled lethally, concentrating their fire on the shining horror that moved into the night.

It vanished behind a tree and was gone. Marion gripped Court's arm.

"Poor Sammy! Can't we go after him?"

"That isn't Sammy," Court said grimly. "Not now. It—it's a horror, an alien thing out of another Universe, perhaps. Yes, I'm going after it, Marion, but not till I've put on my lead suit. I'm not sure I can capture it, even then." He blew across the smoking muzzle of his gun. "A creature whose touch means instant death is loose in the countryside. And I don't even know if it can be killed!"

X

SCIPIO AGRICOLA AFRICANUS sat in a dungeon beneath the Circus arena. Through a barred grating, he watched one gladiator disembowel another. The stroke, he thought, was clean and good, for the men from Gaul were like wolves, dark, feral and quick. Scipio rather hoped he would be matched against them, rather than against lions or an elephant. There was something about the feel of steel matched against your own sword that put heart into a man.

An armored guard, coming along the corridor, pushed open the door of Scipio's cell. His hawk face peered in.

"Your turn soon," he said.

"Good," replied Scipio, with a pleasant oath. "I grow tired of battling fleas."

The soldier chuckled as he bent to adjust a greave.

"By my Lares, you have courage! Too bad your dream failed. I would not have objected to serving under such a man as you."

"I failed because none of my men had the courage of a rabbit." Scipio spat in disgust. "Faith, we could have taken Carthage almost without bloodshed."

"Had your army not fled, leaving you to face the Imperial Guard alone!" The soldier shook his head, grinning wryly. "Nothing but trouble since you came to Africa, Scipio. It was bad enough with those damned Romans yelling that Carthage must be destroyed, but at least they had not tried to destroy it. And

what did you do?"

Scipio's eyes lighted. He was a huge, swarthy man, with the scarred face of a gargoyle. His nose had been broken so often that it sprawled shapelessly awry. Atop that monstrous face, the ringlets of short, curly black hair were incongruous.

"What did I do?" the adventurer asked. "Faith, I tried to serve your king, but he would not let me."

The guard choked and spluttered his outrage.

"Jupiter! You got drunk and dragged the king off to some low gambling hell. No wonder you had to flee to the mountains after that! Then you got some insane idea about creating an independent city of your own. That might have worked, if you had gone far enough into the Nubian country with your followers. But you decided to take Carthage. Carthage!"

The soldier gave an infuriating roar of merriment.

"Come within the reach of my manacled hands," Scipio invited pleasantly, "and I'll tear off your head with considerable joy."

"Save that for the arena," said the soldier, moving back slightly. "Tonight the cries will announce that the Carthaginian Scipio is no more. Only you are not a man of Carthage, come to think of it. Are you?"

"Why not?" The giant captive shrugged. "Rome is a melting pot. The blood of a dozen races mix in my veins. I am a citizen of Carthage now, at least for a while. By the way, how do I die?"

"Elephant. They have a huge tusker they've driven *musth* with rage and hunger. You are to face him on equal terms, both of you unarmed." He glanced cautiously over his shoulder. "I am to accompany you to the arena gate. And if you happen to seize my sword and take it with you—well, such things have happened."

Scipio nodded. "Too bad you're not carrying a lance. However a sword must do. I can spill the behemoth's blood before it tramples me. Thanks, soldier. If you let me escape now, I'll make you a prince of the nation I intend to establish."

"Listen to the lunatic," the guard said, with rapt admiration. "In chains, penniless, and offering to make me a prince! A prince of dreams, mayhap. Anyway, my vows are to Caesar, and not the Roman Imperator, either. So you must remain a captive."

The filthy straw rustled under Scipio as he shrugged. A death-cry drifted in from the arena, then the triumphant roar of some ferocious beast.

"Well," said the soldier, "your time has come."

"I wonder." There was a curious look in Scipio's deep-set eyes. "Lately I have had a queer feeling, as though the gods were watching me. Perhaps—"

He did not finish. More guards came, and the Carthaginian was unfettered and escorted along an underground corridor. Almost naked, his brawny body gleamed like mahogany in the sharp contrasts of light and shadow that filtered in through bars. Then the arena opened before them. Scipio was thrust forward. He saw at his side the friendly soldier, turned so that his sword-hilt was exposed.

WITH a grin and quick movement, Scipio clutched the weapon and whipped it out. Before the startled guards could move, he ran forward into the hot sands of the arena. The soles of his feet burned, then cooled as he halted in a patch of reddened sand.

The blazing African sun flooded down in blinding whiteness. Scipio had only a vague impression of the crowd that filled the circus. He could pick out no individuals. He felt as though one vast entity, surging, whispering, watching, surrounding him, and the head of the entity was the canopied box of the Lord of Carthage.

Scipio shifted his grip on the sword. He brushed the curly hair from his eyes with one hand, and stood warily on the

balls of his feet. A *musth* elephant, eh? Well, no man could resist such an enemy, yet a man could die fighting.

"Alas for my dreams of empire," the Carthaginian murmured with a crookedly sardonic smile. "Faith, I might have ruled the world, given time. And now I must water the sand with my blood."

He turned to the Imperial box, lifting his hand in salute. The emperor nodded, expecting to hear the usual, "We who are about to die—" of the gladiators.

Scipio disappointed his host. At the top of his voice he howled the words that would most enrage the onlookers.

"Carthage must be destroyed!"

A wave of fury, a gasp of astonishment and rage rippled around the arena. The emperor made a quick, angry gesture. Grinning, Scipio turned to see a barred gate far across the sanded arena rise slowly.

For a few heartbeats there was silence throughout the Circus. The blinding white heat was oppressive. Steam curled from the blood-stains on the sands.

Then the *musth* elephant pounded to the gate. Huge, monstrous, a gray, walking vastness of animated dull savagery, he lurched through the gate and stood motionless, only his bloodshot little eyes alive with hatred. The trunk did not move, save for the tip, which swayed back and forth slightly.

A shadow darkened the arena as a cloud crossed the sun, and then was gone.

Scipio hefted the sword he held. It was a short-bladed weapon, useless unless he could hurl it like a javelin. It was even too broad to pierce an elephant's eye, the most vulnerable spot of the monster. Briefly Scipio thought of slicing off the elephant's trunk as far up as he could reach. But that would still leave the tusks and mighty tree-trunk limbs that could squash a man into red pulp.

"Well," Scipio said with grim amusement, "at least they had to use their biggest elephant to kill me."

His gargoyle face twisted into a fearless grin. In the glaring light, he resembled a teakwood statue, thewed like a colossus.

The elephant came forward slowly, its red eyes questing viciously until it saw Scipio. It paused, and the trunk lifted, waving snakelike in the air. It snorted angrily.

Again the shadow darkened the Sun, and this time it did not pass.

The Carthaginian had no time to look up. He bent slightly from the knees, holding the sword high like a javelin.

The elephant broke into a lumbering trot. Its speed increased. Like the Juggernaut, it bore down on him—

Scipio had a flashing glimpse of the monster—flapping ears, murderously upheld trunk, gleaming tusks. The thunder of its approach was growing louder, booming in his ears. It loomed above him.

From the skies sprang a thunderbolt! Flaming with pale brilliance, the crackling beam raved down. It caught the behemoth in mid-strike, bathed it in shining radiance. And the monster vanished!

It was gone without a trace. The deep craters of its rush ended in the sand a few yards from where the shocked Scipio crouched. From the spectators rose a roar, terrified, unbelieving.

A golden ball of enormous size plunged down into the arena. Lightly as a feather it grounded. A port in its hull sprang open.

Scipio saw a thin, pallid man, with the ascetic face of a Caesar. He was clad in odd garments and was beckoning urgently. Beyond him, Scipio glimpsed a fat Chinese whose round cheeks were quivering with excitement.

A SPEAR flashed through the air, rang impotently against the golden hull. Almost paralyzed with amazement, Scipio ran forward, leaped into the ship. What this miracle might be, he did not know, but it seemed to provide a means

of escape. Whether the pallid man was a god or a devil, at least he seemed friendly. More important, to remain in the arena meant death.

The port slammed shut behind Scipio. He bounded through the inner lock and stood wide-legged, staring around. The sword was still gripped in his hand. Past him the pallid man strode, and entered an inner chamber. A quiver of movement shook the ship as it lifted. The Oriental waddled into view and beamed at Scipio.

"Relax, friend," he said, lisping the unfamiliar tongue. "You speak Latin?"

"Naturally," Scipio stated. "All the world does. Are you a god? I doubt it, for only Bacchus and Silenus are obese, and their skins are not yellow."

The Oriental shook with laughter until he had to hold his heaving belly.

"I have heard of this Bacchus. A new god, but he is a good one. Sit down." He waved toward a couch. "My name is Li Yang. Do you wish food?"

Scipio shook his head and sat gingerly on the soft cushions.

"You called me friend?" he asked.

"I might better have called you comrade. Ardath saw the hidden possibilities in you, dragon-face. He read your mind while you slept. Ah, but you have dreams of empire, poor fool!"

Li Yang shook his head, and his yellow cheeks swung pendulously.

"Ill luck dogs me," Scipio said lightly, grinning. "The gods hate me, so I wear no crown."

"Nor will you. You are not ruthless enough. You could carve out an empire for yourself, but you could not sit upon a throne. Under all thrones the snake coils. You are too honest to be a king, Scipio."

The Carthaginian had been about to answer, but he paused. His dark eyes widened, and a flame sprang into them. Ponderously Li Yang turned.

Two figures stood on the threshold. One was Thordred, but Scipio had no eyes for even that gigantic form. He was staring with a burning fixity at the Atlantean priestess.

She looked lovely indeed. Her delicate figure was veiled by a girdled robe, from the hem of which her tiny toes peeped. Her golden hair hung loosely about her shoulders, and framed the elfin features that showed interested admiration.

"Jove's thunderbolt!" Scipio gasped. "Nay, but this is a goddess! This is Venus herself!"

Jansaiya preened herself. Under her lashes the sea-green eyes watched Scipio slumbrously. She basked in the frank, open gaze.

"This is Scipio?" the priestess asked.

She came forward and put a small, shapely hand on the Carthaginian's brawny arm. He looked down at her, his gargoyle face alight with wonder.

"You know me? But who are you?"

"Jansaiya." The girl glanced over her shoulder. "And this is Thordred."

Scipio saw the giant for the first time, apparently. His gaze met and locked with Thordred's smoldering glare. The two men stood silent. Scipio did not notice when Jansaiya took her hand from his arm.

Li Yang's red lips pursed as he glanced from one to the other.

It was a sight worth seeing. Thordred was huge, elephant-thewed, hairy as a beast, with jutting beard and handsome aquiline, features.

Scipio, though slightly shorter, was almost as huge. His gargoyle face grew stone-hard. Thordred's cat's-eyes glittered. A silent enmity flamed in those glares that met without speech.

Ardath broke the deadlock by coming out of the laboratory.

"We are moving out toward our orbit," he said, smiling. "Soon it will be time to sleep again. Perhaps next time—" He sighed. "Meanwhile, though Scipio is not the super-mentality I need, he is a genius in his way. Let me explain, warrior."

Scipio nodded from time to time as Ardath told his story. The Carthaginian's quick brain grasped the situa-

tion without very much difficulty.

"You will come with us?" Ardath asked at last.

"Why not?" Scipio replied, shrugging. "The world is not ready for such a man as I. In later ages, countries will recognize my worth and kneel at my feet." The granite face cracked into a grin, and he glanced at Jansaiya. "Besides, I shall be in good company. To how many men is it given to know a goddess?"

THORDRED growled under his breath while Li Yang chuckled. The fat Oriental picked up his lute and strummed softly upon it. His voice raised mellowly:

My love has come down from the Moon-lantern,
In the heart of the lotus she dwells—

"And now"— Ardath turned toward the laboratory—"I must adjust my controls. We shall automatically fall into our orbit. For two thousand years we shall sleep, and then revisit Earth."

He vanished into the next room. Li Young sang:

Fragrant are her hands as petals.
In her hair the stars dance.

Jansaiya smiled. Scipio grinned a silent, confident reply to Thordred's dark scowl.

Humming power throbbed through the ship, swiftly grew louder. Li Yang clambered awkwardly on a couch, gesturing for Scipio to follow his example. Sleep poured from the monotonous sound. Idly Li Yang touched the strings of his lute.

"Give me sweet dreams, dear goddess," he murmured.

Jansaiya reclined on a couch. When Scipio turned his head to watch her, her green eyes met his.

Thordred moved stiffly forward. His hand was hidden from view behind him as he stood beside the laboratory door.

Then languorous humming grew louder, more compelling. Jansaiya slept. Li Yang's pudgy hand fell from the lute. Scipio's eyelids drooped.

Footsteps sounded softly. Through the doorway came Ardath, smiling his gentle smile. Perhaps he was dreaming that when he awoke, he would find his quest at an end. Not noticing Thordred beside him, he turned and fumbled over the wall with rapidly slowing fingers.

The skin around Thordred's eyes wrinkled as he fought to remain awake. His hand came up with the slow motion of encroaching torpor, and he gripped a heavy metal bludgeon.

He crashed it down on Ardath's head.

Without a sound, the Kyrian crumpled and fell, lay utterly motionless. Blood seeped slowly through his dark hair.

Instantly Thordred lunged through the doorway and reeled toward an instrument panel. If he could throw a single switch, the sleep-inducing apparatus would be shut off.

Louder the humming grew. Its vibration shuddered through every atom of Thordred's body. In the next room was absolute silence.

Thordred fell without feeling that he was doing so. The shock awakened him. He dragged himself to his knees and crawled on, his hand clawing desperately.

One finger touched the switch and helplessly slipped down. The giant Earthman crouched, shaking his head slowly.

Then he collapsed and sprawled out, silent. The yellow eyes were filmed with cataleptic sleep.

The humming rose to a peak that gradually began to die away. Inside the golden ship, nothing stirred when it reached its orbit and robot controls made swift adjustments. Around Earth the vessel hurtled.

The lute fell from Li Yang's couch. A string snapped.

XI

COURT raced his roadster along the Wisconsin road as he peered through sun-glasses at the lonely countryside.

Beside him, Marion Barton huddled like a kitten in the seat, the collar of her white blouse open for coolness.

"How long?" she asked.

"Couple of hours," Court grunted. "We pass through Madison first. The 'drome's fifty miles south of there."

Marion drew a notebook from her handboy and thumbed through it rapidly.

"Everything's checked, I think," she reported absently. "Except the test flight. I don't believe the *Terra* was thoroughly inspected."

"Damn silly name the papers gave the ship," Court said wryly. "It didn't need a name. It'll make the flight, all right."

"And if it doesn't?"

He shrugged indifferently without glancing at her.

"Nothing much lost. For more than a month now, I've been working on the Plague—since Sammy got away—and I'm still at sea. Earth's science just isn't advanced enough. But perhaps I can find some more advanced alien science in that golden ship. Anyhow, we'll see."

"Why must you go alone?" she insisted, her voice not quite steady.

"Because there's room for only one. We can't take chances. There will be little enough air and supplies as it is. I'm the best man for the job, so I'm the one to go."

"But suppose something happens!"

"I can't stop the Plague by myself. X is still unknown, as far as I'm concerned. The only real clue so far is entropy. I know that X is catalyzed by some element in Earth's atmosphere. It speeds up the entropy of a living organism, changes it into some form of life that might exist, normally, a billion years from now. But it's so alien!"

He switched on the radio. A news commentator was talking excitedly.

"Around Pittsburgh, martial law has been declared. Workers are blasting out a deep trench around the city, and pouring deadly acids into it. Whether this will form an effective barrier, no one knows. The rivers are filled with floating corpses. The contagion is spreading with great speed. Nearly a hundred of the Carriers have been seen in Pittsburgh and the bridges are choked with refugees."

So there were still more of the shining monsters. Sammy had been one of the first, and he was still wandering at large, since nothing could capture or destroy him. The voice on the radio went on:

"The Carriers kill instantly by touching their victims. Lead-plated suits are being issued to the guardsmen; but these do not always work. It depends on the quality of energy emitted by a Carrier. Dynamite has been placed at the New York bridges and tubes. The mayor is ready to isolate Manhattan, if necessary, for protection.

"The war is at a standstill. Troops are mutinying by the thousands. Every metropolis is being vacated. We estimate about three thousand carriers now exist, widely scattered over the earth. From Buenos Aires—"

With an impatient gesture, Court shut off the radio.

"No hope," he said. "The Plague is steadily on the increase. I must get to the golden ship and back as soon as possible."

They sat in silent despair as the car swept along the deserted highways. The landscape was incongruously peaceful. The green, rolling hills of Wisconsin stretched around them. A broad, lazy river flowed quietly beside the road. The only sound in the stillness was the humming of the motor.

Marion leaned her head back and stared up at the cloudless blue sky. All she could do now was let her thoughts drift. Suppose the Plague had never come to Earth. She and Stephen might be driving along together, under this same sky, and perhaps—

She blinked out of her revery and lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

"Thanks," Court said, and took it gently from her.

She lit another for herself.

"Funny," she said.

Court nodded grimly, staring ahead.

"Yes, I know. All this changing—'Giving place to the new.' But God knows what the new order will be. A world peopled by beings of pure energy, eventually consuming all their natural food, and dying off. Then there will be only a dead planet."

"Will it still be as lovely?" she asked softly.

"Lovely?" Court frowned, seemed to notice the landscape for the first time. His gaze swept out over the rolling hills and the placid river. "Yes," he said finally, in a curious voice, "it is rather lovely. I wasn't aware of it before."

"I didn't think you ever would be," she said.

He flushed. "I have had so little time."

"It wasn't that. You never looked at the world or at human beings. You looked through microscopes and telescopes."

HE GLANCED at the girl and his hand went out in a gesture that was somehow pathetic. Then his lips tightened. He drew back, again clutching the wheel firmly. He looked ahead grimly without speaking, not seeing the tears that hung on Marion's lashes.

They reached the air field soon after. The *Terra* had been wheeled out. A shining, golden cylinder, eight feet in diameter and twenty feet long, its ends were slightly tapered and bluntly rounded. It gleamed in contrast to the rich black loam on which it lay.

"Small," Court criticized, "but we had no time to make a larger one. It'll have to do."

He helped Marion from the car and together they went toward the *Terra*. A group of mechanics and workers approached.

"All set," the foreman stated. "She's warmed up and ready, Mr. Court."

"Thanks." He halted at the open port. "Well—"

"Good luck," Marion breathed.

Court stared at her. Curious lines that had never been there before now bracketed his mouth. He looked away at the green hillside, and then back at the girl. His lips parted involuntarily, but with an effort he controlled himself.

"Thanks," he said. "Good-by, Marion. I—I'll see you soon."

He entered the ship and closed the port behind him. Marion stood quite silent, her fingers blindly shredding her handkerchief to rags.

The *Terra* rose smoothly, swiftly mounted straight up. Smaller and smaller it grew, a glittering nugget of gold against the blue sky. Then it was merely a speck, and it was gone.

Marion turned and walked slowly back to the car. Her lips were bravely scarlet, yet they quivered against the pallor of her face.

Court sat before the control panel, peering ahead through a porthole.

"Wonder what effect radiation in space will have?" he murmured. "It's leaded polaroid glass, of course, but the other ship had no portholes at all. They probably used some sort of televisor equipment that's beyond our contemporary science."

He could see nothing but the blue of the sky. It grew darker, shading to a deep purple. Faint stars began to twinkle, until countless points of light were glittering frostily.

"Sirius, Jupiter, Mars." Court sighed.

With the secret of space travel mastered, man could reach all the planets. With sufficient power, the intersteller gulfs might even be bridged. But how long would man continue to exist on Earth?

Hours merged into an unending monotony of watchful, weary vigilance. The *Terra* plunged on, gathering speed.

"Meteors might be a menace," Court mused, "unless the magnetic field deflects them. But that would work only on ferrous bodies. Still, nothing's happened so far." He changed his course slightly. "I'm doubtful about that space armor. Spatial conditions can't be du-

plicated on Earth. Well, I've taken other precautions."

He had had the door made to fit exactly the port that had been telescopically visible on the golden ship.

A queer excitement grew stronger within Court as he neared his destination. He could not keep away from the transparent ports, for he was desperately anxious to see the golden ship. Some subtle instinct told him that the rendezvous might even be more important that he had realized.

How long had the space ship maintained its orbit beyond the atmophere? Whence had it come? What strange secrets might it hold?

When Court found that his fingers were trembling slightly on the controls, he grimly repressed his nervousness. But he could not help wondering. Centuries — eons, perhaps — might have passed while the golden vessel circled the planet. And now Stephen Court, man of Earth, was questing out to what destiny? He did not know, but some premonition of the incredible future must have come to him, for he shuddered.

"Somebody's walked over my grave," he muttered, with a sardonic smile at the whimsy. "Well, it won't be long now."

Again he turned to the port, and his breath caught in his throat.

The golden ship hung there, a mysterious, gleaming cylinder against the star-bright background of black space. Swiftly it grew larger.

AS COURT decelerated, his face was curiously pale. The *Terra* was easy to handle. He deftly pulled it alongside the other craft.

Hull scraped against alloyed hull, till finally the two ports were flush together. Court threw a lever and hastily spun a wheel. He was breathing unevenly, and his eyes were glowing with excitement.

The ships were held firmly together by an airtight rubberoid ring.

He rose, donned a gas-mask, and picked up a revolver. Then he went to the port and gingerly swung it open. The air remained in the ship.

Facing him was a surface of yellow metal, a scarcely visible crack showing that it was an oval door. Court pushed, but it did not yield. A blow torch might cut it, and certainly acids would bite enough. But Court did not resort to these immediately. He fumbled with a powerful electro-magnet and worked unavailingly for a time.

At last, in desperation, he used acids to eat a small hole through the outer hull. The air that rushed out was thin and dead, but far from poisonous. Grunting, Court reached through the gap and managed to open the port.

What he expected, he did not know. His nerves were strung to wire-edge, unbearably tense, now that he was face to face with the solution of the mystery. The port opened, and for a moment Court was weak with reaction.

He saw nothing but a short corridor, about six feet long, featureless and vacant. Naturally there would be an airlock, for safety's sake. He should have expected one. At the farther end was another door, but this one had a lever set in it.

Court walked forward and moved the lever slightly. The port swung open. Air gusted from the *Terra* to the golden ship. He stepped across the threhsold and halted, staring around.

He was in a good-sized room, apparently only one of several in this huge vessel. Open doorways gaped in the walls. The chamber was there, with nothing but a few couches.

But on the couches lay human beings!

A gigantic gargoyle-faced man was naked, save for a clout, his bronzed body glistening in the dim illumination that came from no discernible source. Another man, an Oriental, fat as a Buddha, sprawled untidily on a pile of cushions. On the floor beside him lay a lute with one broken string. And there was a girl.

An elfin creature with ivory skin, her

lips curved into a tender smile, she slept with her golden hair partially veiling her face.

On the floor near a doorway lay another figure, face down. Court crossed to it and turned it over. He stared at a slight form and chiseled, patrician features. That face had some vague yet unmistakable touch of the alien visitor to Earth.

Something caught Court's eye beyond the threshold of the next room. A huge body sprawled there, one hand outstretched toward an instrument panel.

Court strode toward it.

He halted, realizing that he was in a laboratory, but no Earthly one! He blinked in astonishment at sight of the apparatus surrounding him. Then, forcing down his curiosity, he knelt beside the prone figure and turned it on its back.

The man's face was handsome in an arrogantly ferocious way, though a black spade-beard jutted from his pugnacious chin. The giant lay motionless, and Court saw that no breath lifted the hairy barrel chest. Nevertheless he made careful tests, only to realize that the man was pulseless, apparently dead.

For some reason, Court was not convinced. Could corpses remain in such a perfect state of preservation? Was there not such a thing as catalepsy? He returned to the others, and found that they were equally lifeless, equally well preserved.

There was the long chance of a wild hunch. Court returned to his own ship and came back with heating pads and stimulants. He paused to consider.

Which one should he attempt to revive first? The girl? The Chinese? Why not the bearded man? His presence in the laboratory, the heart of the ship, indicated that he was probably a scientist.

WITH a grunt of decision, Court went to the prostrate giant and put down his burden.

Warmth must come first. The heating pads were arranged in armpits and thighs.

He followed them with adrenalin, with brandy, artificial respiration.

Court placed his hands in the proper position and forced air from the giant's lungs. Then back, and down again. Down, and up.

With a surge and a rush, the man came back to life. He flung Court off with a swift gesture and sprang up. His hand closed on the switch he had been striving for.

But he halted and whirled, his yellow cat's-eyes glowering at the smaller man.

He said something Court did not understand.

Rising to his feet, Court kept one hand on his gun as he watched the giant warily.

Abruptly the blackbeard strode past Court and into the next room. When he returned, he was grinning. He stopped at the door and stood with arms akimbo. After a moment he spoke slowly in Latin.

It was a language that Court, being a scientist, had studied with some thoroughness.

"I come from Earth," he explained. "The third planet of this Sun. I mean no harm. I awoke you—"

The other nodded. "I am Thordred. But there is no time to talk now. Tell me, swiftly as you can, how you found us."

Court obeyed. As he talked, Thordred went into the adjoining room and stood contemplating the silent figures. He stooped beside the slim body on the floor.

"Dead, I think. Yet—this is your ship?" He pointed toward the *Terra*.

"Yes."

"Well, you will not need it. My ship is yours now."

A gleam of amusement shone in the yellow eyes as Thordred lifted Ardath's body and carried him into the *Terra*. He paused to study the controls. After making a careful adjustment, he returned.

The door of the *Terra* he closed behind him, then both ports of the larger ship. Court felt a touch of apprehension.

"Thordred," he said with quick anger in his voice, "what are you doing?"

The giant turned to a vision screen in the wall.

He flicked it on.

"Look!"

On the screen, Court saw the *Terra*, flashing away through space. He felt a sudden pang that chilled to cold rage.

"What right—"

Thordred grinned. "Slowly, Stephen Court. I have said that this ship is yours. As for him"—black hatred shone in the yellow eyes—"he was a renegade and a traitor. He tried to kill us all. He is dead now, but science and magic may bring even a dead man back to life. So Ardath is going where there is neither science nor magic—toward the Sun!"

"The Sun!"

"Yes. I set the controls on your ship. They were not difficult to understand. Ardath is doomed, if a dead man can die again. And now we will attend to the others."

He glanced at the silent figures on the couches.

"We'll awaken them?" Court asked.

"One at a time. The girl first." Thordred hesitated. "Revive Jansaiya, Court, while I adjust the apparatus. We are going back to Earth."

"Good." Court smiled. "We need your help."

His throat felt achingly dry, for at last his search was at an end. With the science of this Thordred added to his own, the Plague could be fought, perhaps conquered.

Thordred was smiling triumphantly as he went into the laboratory.

XII

PROMPTLY Court busied himself with the golden-haired girl. The feline look in Jansaiya's sophisticated green eyes, and the vague suggestion of cruelty about her lips, were not in evidence now as she lay in cataleptic sleep. Rather she seemed some elfin creature out of Earth's myth-haunted past, a daughter of Neptune.

The violet-tinted gossamer robe scarely veiled the alluring curves of her slim form. Her lashes lay golden on the rose-petal cheeks. She seemed helpless, child-like. Utterly trusting, she lay curled like a kitten on the couch.

The poignant loveliness of the Atlantean girl was suddenly an aching stab in Court's heart. He felt no passion for her, no infatuation. She was too completely removed from mundane life for that. But Jansaiya curiously seemed to typify and embody for Court something he had never known. Out of the world's youth, she was youth, a symbol of the dreams that most men know before they grow too old.

Staring down at Jansaiya, Court realized that he had never known youth and wondrous dreams. Unexpectedly he thought of Marion Barton, whom he had left on Earth. He put her out of his mind by working swiftly.

Occasionally Thordred came to the door of the laboratory to watch, but as time wore on the giant appeared less often. Though he had learned much when the thought-transference helmet had given him the knowledge of Ardath's brain, Thordred had not acquired the Kyrian's super-mentality.

Guiding the ship back to Earth was a difficult task. Besides, he was busy making certain adjustments on the thought-helmet. So he remained in the laboratory, and did not see Jansaiya waken.

Court had turned away to stare curiously at the other two sleepers, Li Yang and Scipio the Carthaginian. The giant warrior puzzled him. Since the man wore only a breech-clout, Court found it hard to guess his origin. The color of the skin was negroid, but the thin, firm, harsh lips and the hair certainly were not. Li Yang, though, was obviously an Oriental. What did that mean? Had this

space ship actually come from another world?

The golden-haired girl might have been born on an alien planet—perhaps even Thordred and the sleeping, naked giant had also. But the Oriental? Court frowned, and then glanced at Jansaiya as she strirred.

She had been breathing regularly for some time. Now her lashes fluttered and the green eyes opened. When she looked up at Court, a soft, wordless sound of inquiry murmured from the red lips.

"Athloyee s'ya voh—"

Court matched the girl's language, which he did not know was Atlantean, with Latin.

"Don't try to talk yet. You are safe."

The brows wrinkled in puzzlement as the cruel gaze scrutinized him.

"I am safe? Of course. But where is Ardath?"

"Dead. Thordred—"

Court paused, startled at the look on Jansaiya's face. He saw fear, and incredulous amazement, and a soft smile of evil triumph that repelled him.

"Dead?" She turned her head and looked across the room. "Li Yang. Yes. And Scipio. But Thordred, is he dead also?"

"No. Shall I get him?"

Court rose, but halted as a slim hand touched him.

"Wait. Who are you?"

Before he could reply, Thordred's harsh voice broke in.

"Jansaiya! You are awake? Good!"

The giant strode into the room, his amber eyes intent on the girl. Briefly they flickered toward Court.

"We are in the atmosphere now. There is not much time. Come with me."

Thordred made a quick, stealthy signal to Jansaiya, which Court failed to understand. The Atlantean girl pursed her lips but said nothing.

In the laboratory, Thordred pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Court. Put on this helmet."

He picked up a bulky headpiece, crowned with helical wires, and extended it. Court hesitated.

"What is it?" he asked cautiously.

"Nothing dangerous. It will teach you my language, and teach me yours. Certain memory patterns, knowledge of our native tongue, will be tranferred from my brain to yours, and vice versa. Come."

Thordred placed a duplicate helmet on his own head and sat down. Some inexplicable impulse made Court resist.

"I'm not sure—"

The giant grinned suddenly.

"I told you I mean you no harm. If I had wanted to kill you, I could have done it long ago. I need your knowledge, and you need mine." Thordred chuckled at some secret thought. "And it is best that we know each other's language."

"All right."

COURT nodded and slipped the helmet on his head. Simultaneusly Thordred leaned forward and touched a keyboard. There was a whining crackle of released energy. Court felt the momentary agony of intolerable stricture about his skull, then it was gone. The scene before him was blotted out by a curtain of darkness. He lost consciousness. . . .

It seemed scarcely a second later when he awoke. Painfully opening his eyes, he saw that the laboratory was empty. His head ached fearfully. The helmet, however, was gone, as he discovered by investigating with his hands.

"Awake, eh?" The words were unmistakably in English. Thordred stood on the threshold. He went to a shelf, took a flask from it, and gave it to Court. "Drink this. It's a stimulant. Not like your—what was it, brandy?—but equally potent."

Court gulped the fluid, which was tasteless and incredibly cold. Immediately his headache was gone. He glanced up at the giant.

"You learned English, I see. That helmet's a handy gadget. But I didn't learn your language!"

"No," Thordred admitted. "The adjustment wasn't quite accurate. But it doesn't matter. There's plenty of time. Meanwhile, as you say, I can talk English. Only that was necessary for us to be able to discuss scientific principles."

Stephen saw the common sense of that. There were no ancient Latin terms for modern scientific theories and devices.

"Where are we now?" he asked.

"On Earth." Thordred glanced searchingly at him. "Court, I'll be frank with you. I learn more than merely your language from your mind. The Plague that worries you, for example. I acquired your memory of that."

"You did?"

Court's dark face twisted in a scowl as he felt the premonition of danger. Just how much had Thordred learned from him? He shrugged, knowing that it did not matter. The bearded giant was a friend, the only strong ally on Earth. Why look for trouble where none existed?

"I've decided what's best to be done," Thordred said. "This Plague—I know no more about it than you do. I don't know its origin or nature, nor any way of defeating it."

Court leaped to his feet, a sick emptiness in his stomach.

"Thordred! With your science and mine, we should be able to find some way of conquering it."

"There's only one way. Earth is doomed. Anyone who remains will eventually be destroyed. But this is a space ship, Court, and it isn't necessary for us to wait for destruction." With a lifted hand, Thordred forestalled interruption. "Wait. There are other planets where life is possible, where the Plague doesn't exist. We can carry from fifty to seventy passengers, men and women. That will be enough to start a new race and civilization on another world."

"No!" Court scarcely knew he spoke. "You mean go off and leave the world to doom?"

"What good would it be to stay? We'd merely guarantee our own destruction. You're a strong, intelligent man, Court, the sort of person I want in the civilization I shall build. That's why I did not kill you."

Court's eyes narrowed. There was a dead silence. Thordred's chill glance did not falter.

"I can kill you, even now, quite easily," he went on slowly. "But the choice is yours. Join me, serve me with your fine brain and muscles, and you need not die. What's your answer?"

Court was silent, trying to analyze his feelings. Of course his anxiety to defeat the Plague was purely scientific. How could he, a super-intellect, feel any sympathy for ordinary men and women? What did it matter if Earth died, as long as a new civilization would be built on a distant, safer world?

A bell rang sharply through the ship. When Thordred flicked on a vision screen, Court stared at it.

THE SPACE ship had landed in what seemed to be a park. Suddenly he recognized it as Central Park, in New York. About the ship, a cordon of police was keeping back a surging crowd. A small group of uniformed men huddled close to the hull, using an acetylene torch to burn through the metal.

Thordred grinned. "Perhaps I could have landed in a less populated spot, but I'm impregnable, with the weapons at my command. One flash of a certain ray, and that crowd will be burned to cinders."

"You don't intend to—" Court heard himself saying.

"But I do. The sooner Earth learns my power, the better!"

Thordred turned and went to a control board. Stephen Court stared at him. The emotions he had rigidly subdued all his life were flooding up into that cold brain of his. But it was not cold now. Burning in Court's mind was the face of Marion Barton, tender with humanity. He saw the face of old Sam-

my, brown and wrinkled. Sammy had sacrificed himself for an ideal, an ideal in which Court did not believe.

He had not believed in it till now. Court's heritage, the basic humanity in him, suddenly flooded through the artificial barriers of restraint. He had fought the Plague to save men and women from horrible death, though he had not realized his true motive till now. Falsely he had told himself that he was a scientific machine. He had almost hypnotized himself into believing it. But all along, Court realized now, his motives had been those of common humanity.

A super-mentality, perhaps, but first of all he was a man! He would instinctively fight to protect those weaker than himself, even against insuperable odds.

Court's breath caught in his throat as he saw Thordred push a lever in the control board. With silent desperation he hurled himself at the bearded giant.

He was hurled back by a paralyzing shock. Thordred whirled, his mouth gaping. As Court tensed himself for another leap, the giant halted him with a lifted hand.

"You fool, you can't penetrate this force screen around my body. Stay where you are!"

Court did not move, but his lean figure quivered with suppressed fury.

"You have your science, Thordred, but so have I."

"Your science?" Thordred bellowed. He thrust out a huge hand, gripped Court. "Listen to me! I told you I learned more from you than your language. That was true. I drained your brain of all the knowledge it held. Your memory is mine now."

Court went sick as the import of the words struck home. His gaze went from Thordred's face, moved swiftly about the laboratory for some weapon. But the apparatus was utterly infamiliar to him. Yet it had to be based on rigid scientific principles that would be the same in any Universe.

Court's mind worked with frantic speed, trying to find some coherent pattern. Levers, buttons, wiring, transparent tubes—each one had its definite part. On one panel, several red lights were flashing on and off. Below each light, Court recognized what must have been push-buttons.

There were two possible answers. Either the switchboard had some connection with Thordred's death ray, of which he had spoken, or else it was part of an alarm system. It was probably an alarm system, since Thordred was busy at another instrument panel. The police outside the ship were trying to burn through a port, and the red light was flashing. The button beneath that light, Court decided, probably opened the door.

His face was immobile as he shrugged, deliberately letting his shoulders droop despairingly. Thordred's mouth twisted into a triumphant grin. He half turned from his prisoner, and his hand touched the lever again.

And then Court sprang—not at Thordred. He leaped toward the panel where the red light glowed. His finger stabbed out and depressed the button!

XIII

JUST too late came Thordred's roar. A burst of sound welled into the ship. Men were shouting, and footsteps tramped loudly on the metal floor of the airlock. Court sped to meet them. His hands lifted above his head, he was shouting warning. The skin of his back crawled with expectation of an attack.

But Thorndred did not pursue. Instead, there came a sizzling crackle from behind Court. Strong hands caught him, and he found himself in the midst of a group of police. He turned.

Across the door of the laboratory, a veil of wavering light flickered. Court seized the arm of an officer to prevent him from moving toward the hazy glow.

"Wait! That's dangerous."

"What do you mean? Who are you?"

"Never mind that now. Shoot through the light, but don't go near it. You

may be electrocuted. Do as I say."

The leader of the group, a gray-haired, bulky man, stared.

"I know you. You're Stephen Court. I've seen your pictures in the paper. What is all this about, anyhow?"

Court swiftly noted the insignia of rank on the man's blue sleeve.

"There's no time now, Sergeant. There's a killer beyond that light barrier. He's got to be stopped!"

"But we can't shoot down a man on your word."

Court sucked in his breath, then his hand went out in a blurring motion.

Grabbing a heavy revolver from one of the officers, he whirled and pumped bullets at the barrier of fire. Flame crackled and snarled. The bullets could not penetrate the barrier. Half-melted, they dropped to the floor.

The revolver was wrested from his hand. The sergeant eyed him in amazement, holding the smoking gun.

"I tell you—"

Court made a gesture of despair as he heard a low whine, rising in pitch and intensity, throbbing through the ship. He knew that Thordred was busy in the laboratory. He tried a new tack.

"This ship may be blown up at any minute. Get your men out. Keep the crowd back." He hesitated, then pointed to the unconscious forms of the Chinese and the gargoyle-faced giant on their couches. "Get them out, too."

Jansaiya, the Atlantean girl, was nowhere in sight, and there was no time to search for her.

The menace of explosion the sergeant could understand. He issued swift orders. His men swarmed out of the ship, carrying the cataleptic men.

Court followed. He could not guess what Thordred would do now, but he suspected that the killer might loose his death rays on the mob. Orders ran from one officer to another. The crowd was pushed back, milling, asking questions, shuffling unwillingly.

Standing at the sergeant's side, Court bit his lip in indecision. What now? Thordred was impregnable behind his force screen. Without equipment, Court could do nothing. With the right apparatus, he knew, he could find the vibration-rate of the screen and neutralize it. But there was no equipment here.

"This got anything to do with the Plague?" the sergeant said. "We're evacuating New York, you know."

"What? Evacuating New York!"

"Yeah. The Plague's hit us. The city's a death-trap, with eight million people here. Martial law's been declared, though, and everything's under control. The whole city's moving out before the Plague spreads."

Court nodded, staring at the ship.

"Well, clear the Park and get some planes to bomb our friend there. I don't know if explosive will harm him, but it's worth trying while there's still time. As for those two unconscious men you took out of the ship, get them to a hospital. We'll—"

There was a sudden interruption. From the golden hull, a ray of cold green brilliance probed. As it shot toward Court, he felt a wave of icy chill. All the strength was abruptly drained from his body. He felt himself falling.

The ray flamed brighter, turned to yellow, then to white. It splashed in pale radiance over the sergeant. His strong face seemed to melt, the flesh blackening in cindery horror over the bone-structure. The officer dropped without a sound.

Through filming eyes, Court saw the golden space ship rise from its resting place. It shot up and hovered. Fleeing abruptly into the western skies, it was gone!

When the ray touched Court, it had not been strong enough to kill, only to paralyze. But the sergeant was horribly dead.

Court felt himself slipping down into the black pit of unconsciousness. His last memory was that of some small bird wheeling above him against the blue. Then darkness took him....

HEARING returned to him first. The sound was confused and chaotic. Court lay motionless, striving to analyze it. As if from a vast distance, he seemed to hear a babble of voices, faintly mumbling what sounded like gibberish. Piercing through this was a medley of shrill whistles and sirenlike noises that were utterly inexplicable.

Then Court opened his eyes, looked straight up at a bare white ceiling. Sunlight made square patterns on it.

He could move, he discovered. Without difficulty he sat up, found that he was in one of a row of cots that ran down the length of a long room. He was in a hospital!

Court's voice cracked when he cried out. He tried again, but roused only an echo. Wonderingly he rubbed his chin and gasped in amazement. A beard? He must have been unconscious for two weeks, at least!

He rose, shivering in his regulation hospital nightgown. Though the windows were closed, the room was icy cold. Rocking weakly on his feet, Court looked around.

The man in the next bed looked familiar. It was the obese Oriental he had last seen in the golden space ship! The man lay silent, motionless, no breath lifting his huge paunch.

In the cot beyond lay the scar-faced giant, the man who had resembled a gladiator. He, too was apparently dead or in a cataleptic state.

Some of the other beds were occupied, Court saw. He made a quick investigation. Strangers, and dead, all of them. Some had plainly died of starvation and thirst. The blankets in most cases were tumbled and twisted, and some of the bodies lay on the floor, where they had apparently flung themselves. One grizzled oldster was huddled in a heap near the door, his skinny hand still outstretched for aid that could never come.

The hospital must have been deserted. But what could have caused medical men to forsake their patients? Physicians do not break the Hippocratic Oath so easily. That meant—

The Plague!

His throat tight, Court stumbled to a table where a carafe of water stood. It was stagnant with long standing and half evaporated, but he gulped down a repulsive swallow.

A folded newspaper on the table caught his gaze. Hastily he folded the paper to the first page. Flaring headlines greeted him.

PLAGUE STRIKES NEW YORK!
20 Carriers Reported in Manhattan
Mayor Orders City Evacuated!

Hastily linotyped columns gave the story. All over Greater New York, the plague had suddenly appeared. In Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, from Harlem to the Battery the shining men, harbingers of weird death, had appeared.

Thinking the invasion had arrived by way of Jersey and the surrounding area, the mayor had directed the evacuation to take place northward. But in the box labeled "Latest News Bulletins," it became apparent that the infection was spreading with fatal speed. Among eight millions of people, the Plague ran like wildfire.

Well, judging by his beard and the date of the paper, that had been two weeks ago. What was the country like now?

Court went to the window and stared out. The bleak, snow-covered expanse of Central Park was far below. Small, irregular dark blotches lay on the whiteness. Were they bodies?

Court found a telephone and jiggled the receiver impatiently. Not even the dial-tone answered him. New York must be entirely deserted, save by the dead!

Again he went to the window. This time he saw a shining oval of light, dwarfed by distance, gliding under the trees in the park. A Carrier!

Court knew he could not remain in New York. With a nod of decision, he glanced at the two motionless figures

on the cots beside his own. Hastily he began to gather equipment. He saw a use for the Oriental and the giant. He could not leave them here, frozen in cataleptic sleep, even if he did not think their knowledge might prove valuable.

He used heat, stimulants and artificial respiration. The stimulants were easy to procure, after a trip down the corridor into adjoining wards. It was harder to find adrenalin. Court had to break down a door before locating the drug, but finally he was ready.

ELECTRICITY, rather than gas, supplied the hospital. He knew there would be no current now. Court hesitated. Frowning, he stared out the window. He heard again the distant din that had awakened him—the faint hooting, and the low mumble of far voices.

Radios, of course! Innumerable radios had been left turned on when the evacuation had taken place, and they were still broadcasting. That meant there was still electricity. Relieved, Court found heating pads and pressed them into place about his two patients.

Little artificial respiration was necessary. Under the shock of the adrenalin, first the giant, and then the Oriental, stirred. They wakened almost together.

Court gave a gasp of relief. Till then he had not realized just how much his fortnight of hypnotized slumber had weakened him. Not only slowed and retarded metabolism, but he had not eaten nor drunk for weeks. Shivering, he sank down on a cot and watched his patients slowly and gradually awaken.

There was so much to do! He must communicate with these two. But what language did they speak? Would they be able to understand Latin? After that, there would be so many things! Find out what had happened, leave New York safely—

"But the first thing," Court murmured, "is to stow some food under my belt. No," he resolved, glancing down at his nightgown, "the first thing I need is a pair of pants!"

XIV

NEARLY an hour later Court finally finished his story and learned from Li Yang and Scipio their own tale. Luckily both understood Latin. When Court's knowledge of the language failed, he pieced it out in Greek, which Scipio knew well.

"I am familiar with all the tongues spoken around the Middle Sea—the Mediterranean," the huge Carthaginian stated. "This English of yours sounds like a hybrid language, a mixture of Latin, Greek, Goth, and Zeus knows what else. However, I will learn it. We had a saying that those in Helvetia had best do as the Helvetians do, though all they generally did was freeze."

Scipio chuckled deep in his barrel chest.

"We have a saying that jackasses bray at inopportune moments," said Li Yang blandly. "Therefore, hold your tongue, Scipio, while we make some plans." He sighed ponderously. "So Ardath is dead, eh? Eheu, he was a wise man, and a good one. Also I have lost my lute, so I grieve."

"I scarcely knew Ardath," Scipio confessed, "though he saved my life, of course. But the nymph-girl, Jansaiya—I needed only a glimpse of her to lose my heart and soul." The gargoyle face twisted in pained memory. "What had we best do, Court?"

"Get out of New York. After that, we can make our plans. I want to get back to my laboratory. But first—well, come along."

Court rose and led the others into the corridor. Li Yang shivered as the chill wind rustled under his scanty gown.

"The world has grown colder," he mourned. "Not even on the Northern steppes did I feel such a knifelike blast."

Court was unavailingly pressing the elevator buttons.

"Guess they're not working," he said wryly. "That means we'll have to walk all the way down. It'll keep us warm,

anyway. Watch out for any Carriers."

Scipio shook his head as the three hurried down the stairs.

"I do not understand this Plague. Civilizations change, of course. New gods and new magics spring up. But what you tell me of this Plague smacks of the *vrykrolokas*, the vampire."

The others had no breath for talking. Scipio continued to muse aloud as they descended. When they reached the street, though, he was the only one who was not panting.

"Zeus, Apollo, Kronos, and Neptune!" he roared, staring up at the skyscrapers. "Surely the gods must have reared these buildings!"

"Did gods build the Nilotic pyramids?" Li Yang asked with breathless irony. "Men learn always, and always they build higher. But my poor toes will be frozen!" He danced about grotesquely in the slush. "You are a hardy race, Court, to walk about in these skimpy togas."

Court was glancing about swiftly.

"Come in here," he said.

He hurried toward a nearby shop. He had seen that the window was broken, and a burglar alarm was clanging loudly from within. That explained the medley of noises he had heard from the hospital. Hundreds of burglar alarms, all over New York, were screaming. The mobs must have looted during their flight. This men's clothing shop had certainly been looted, judging by its appearance. Court could understand why property rights didn't mean much just now.

He guided Li Yang and Scipio to the various departments, and helped them outfit themselves with suitable clothing.

"Breeches and boots will be best, I think," he suggested. "We may have hard going. Pick out large-sized boots or you'll blister your feet in an hour."

It was difficult to find clothing that fitted the gigantic Carthaginian, and even harder to equip Li Yang, but at last the task was finished. Completely clothed, even to fleece-lined gloves, the three returned to the street.

Now they needed food and drink. Down the avenue a little way was an Automat. Court led them into it, pausing at the entrance to examine a motionless, shrunken body that lay there.

It was the corpse of a man, emaciated and pallid, frozen rigid. It was oddly shriveled, which Court recognized as the stigmata of Plague victims. Though the man had certainly been dead since the evacuation of New York, there was no sign of decomposition.

"Draining of vital energy means absolute sterility, no germs or microbes—that's logical," Court muttered.

At least there would be no danger of a pestilence. He smiled crookedly. Pestilence?

There was nobody to be harmed by it, anyway.

A RADIO in the Automat was humming noisily. Court hesitated, still inhibited by a lifetime of conditioning. But he went to the change desk, and appropriated a handful of nickels.

Supplying the others with trays, he carefully selected foods that appeared still edible. The coffee spigot ran a tar-colored, icy fluid. But it was somewhat better than the sour milk and stale water.

Court went to the radio and adjusted it. Then he joined the others at one of the round little tables.

"News," he said, nodding at the box that was strange to them. "I'll translate."

"Static is becoming increasingly troublesome as the Plague grows," the radio blared. "The electrical energy emitted by the Carriers interferes with broadcasting. European short-wave transmission is impossible. The transoceanic cables have failed. From Washington, D. C. comes the latest European news, brought by Clipper across the Atlantic.

"The plague seems to have concentrated its force so far in the Western Hemisphere, though its strength is increasing gradually in Europe. Ports are

crowded as mobs try to storm their way onto ships outward bound. There is a feeling that on the high seas is safety. This is untrue.

"The *Hozima Maru,* a passenger ship, was today washed upon the coast at Point Reyes, above San Francisco. Spectators reported that the only living beings aboard were several Carriers."

In grim undertones Court translated.

"The Eastern Seaboard is still being evacuated," the voice went on. "The United States is under martial law. As yet the Plague remains a mystery, though all over the world, scientists are working night and day to check it. A scientific congress has been called at The Hague, to convene tomorrow at noon.

"We are still receiving reports about the mysterious golden airship which first appeared in Central Park, New York, two weeks ago. Since then it has landed eight times, always in a sparsely populated area. Unconfirmed reports state that men and women have been forced to enter the ship. Two hours ago, according to San Francisco's station KFRC, the ship landed on the Berkeley Hills."

Court's voice rose excitedly as he translated. Scipio sat back with a grunt, and the Oriental pursed his red lips.

"So Thordred's still on Earth." Li Yang rubbed his fat hands together. "Good! Court, there are marvels of science in the golden ship, all the wonders of Ardath's great civilization. If you can get your hands on them—"

Court frowned. "As soon as Thordred finishes recruiting the people he needs to start a new life on a different planet, he'll vanish forever. The worst of it is, he's drained my mind, taken all my knowledge. Everything I know, I share with him now. But I've got to get back to my Wisconsin lab. I have apparatus there that will enable me to construct a weapon or two that might give me a chance against Thordred. But till I get to the lab, I can't even locate the golden ship."

"Then why do we wait here?" Scipio thrust back his chair and stood up, towering incongruously in the gleaming shininess of the Automat. "Let us hurry!"

They went out. Behind them the radio blared:

"—shall keep broadcasting as long as we are able. The city is entirely evacuated. We are barricaded in this station, and shall remain here until our power fails, or until. . . . This is WOR, Newark, New Jersey. All listeners are warned to leave their homes immediately, and—"

Fifth Avenue lay silent under a white mantle. Snow had fallen within the past twenty-four hours. The sky, however, was blue and cloudless. Singularly eerie was the silence that lay over New York, made more horrible by the mutter of radios and the distant jarring of alarms. These, too, would die when the power failed.

There were bodies in the streets, most of them white-mounded hummocks under the snow. Hundreds of automobiles had been wrecked. A huge bus lay on its side beside an overturned garbage truck.

Twice they saw carriers—shining, pallid ovals of glowing radiance—floating toward them. Each time Court led his companions into buildings and through a roundabout course of passages and stairways that led them to safety.

"The subway might be safer," he mused, "but there may be Carriers down there. And the power's still on, of course."

COURT did not mention his fear of the carnage he might discover underground. Yet curiously the Plague had left little horror in its wake. It was far too fantastically unreal. The bombs and shrapnel of war would have left blood and ruin. But this— There was only white silence, and bodies that were less like corpses than cold statues of marble.

"Here." Court halted by a parked

automobile. "No, there's no gas." He frowned, after a glance at the dashboard gauge. "Come on."

Scipio was peering into a window. Abruptly he kicked high, and the glass fell in clattering shards. The Carthaginian reached through the gap and brought out a cavalry saber in its scabbard.

"It's light enough," he grunted, balancing the weapon in his hand. "But it's sharp. We may need this."

He fastened it to his belt, while Li Yang was peering down the street.

"Court!" the Oriental called. "What is it?"

"A Carrier—"

"I see it."

Swiftly Court guided his companions around the corner. They turned west from Fifth Avenue into Fifty-eighth Street. Half a block down, they paused at sight of two more Carriers coming toward them.

Court glanced around. On his right was a street blocked with a mass of automobile wreckage. The tower of Rockefeller Plaza rose into the sky. On his left was the entrance of an office building. But through the glass doors, Court could see that the lobby was strewn with bodies, struck down as they had tried to escape the onrushing Plague.

Court wondered with a strange twinge of pity, how many of them had been ready for death. Probably none.

He came to himself abruptly. There was no time for philosophizing. The carriers were closing in upon them from both sides. Scipio pointed to the side street.

"There. We can climb over."

"Wait!" Court's sharp command halted the others on the curb. "Here's a car."

A large, black sedan was parked a few feet away. Two bodies lay near it—a man's and a woman's. The girl, scarcely more than a child, lay in a pitiful little huddle on the running-board, her blond hair whitened with snow. The man, a bulky, dark young fellow, lay with his face in the gutter, a cigar still drooping from one corner of his mouth.

But the keys were in the ignition. Hastily Court sprang into the car, turned the key and pressed the starter. He really expected no response. To his surprise, the battery painfully turned the cold engine over.

Court dared waste no more time. He glanced around. With a gasp of relief, he saw that the shining bodies of the Carriers had halted. They were at least a hundred feet away, and there might still be time.

He kept his foot down on the starter. The motor caught and abruptly died. Viciously he manipulated the choke.

"Get ready to run!" he warned.

But again the motor caught, and Court gunned it with great care. The echoes boomed out thunderously in the canyon of the street. Li Yang and Scipio sat tensely beside Court, more afraid of this noisy invention than of the incomprehensible Carriers.

"They are coming toward us," Scipio reported in an understone, feeling for his saber. "I shall get out and hold them back till—"

"No!" Court let out the clutch. "Stay where you are."

The car jerked into motion. There was a sickening moment when the motor sputtered, coughed, and almost stopped.

Court jammed down the gas, heard the exhaust pipe crack open with a deafening roar. Then they were plunging forward.

But the Carriers were ominously close. Into Court's mind came a weird, illogical thought: "Pillars of fire and smoke." Was that it? It didn't matter, for two of them directly ahead, were gliding toward the car.

He spun the wheel, skidded on the slushy pavement. He shot between the two monsters, missing them by a hair's breadth. The sedan rocketed on, gathering speed.

Court swallowed hard and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the

back of his hand, sighing audibly.

"Narrow squeak." He added with wry humor, "This is a one-way street, and we're going the wrong way. But I doubt if we'll get a ticket."

THEY crossed Sixth Avenue, then Seventh, and turned left on Broadway. Court headed for the Holland Tunnel. Before he reached the tube, he sighted a tangle of wreckage which told him that route was closed. Hastily he turned north along the Hudson, hoping he could get through at the George Washington Bridge.

The ice-bordered river flowed past silently, unruffled now by any boats. In the distance, the Jersey Palisades were traceries of frost. No smoke at all rose on the skyline.

"Gods!" Scipio observed. "This is a world of wonders, Court. What is that?"

"Grant's Tomb," said Court. "Let's see what the radio says."

He switched it on, but got only static. He turned the switch off, for he did not know the battery's strength. He had almost a tankful of gas, he saw, and was grateful for that. Yet it would not take him to Wisconsin.

He would take the straight western route toward Chicago, and then cut northwest, unless he could find an airplane. But in this disorganized area, Court doubted whether one would be available. They all must have been commandeered.

The bridge was open. They shot across, disregarding the glaring speed limit signs.

Court found the highway he wanted. He sped on, seeing no sign of life. He was remined of the last time he had driven across the Wisconsin hills, with Marion at his side. It almost seemed as though nothing had happened since then, for the landscape was still incongruously peaceful. Only one thing betrayed the existence of the Plague—the occasional wrecks seen beside the highway, and the absence of traffic. An airplane startlingly roared overhead a sharp contrast against the blue.

But Marion was not here. Court realized that he missed her. She was the perfect complement for his mind, the ideal assistant. There was something else, too, but Court subconsciously steered away from the thought, refusing to let himself realize why he missed Marion so profoundly. He could see her clearly, a slim brown-eyed girl—

Rot! Such thoughts wasted time, and there was no time to waste. Sitting beside Court now, crowded uncomfortably in the front seat, Scipio and the huge Li Yang writhed uneasily. They typified the whole new set of factors which Court must integrate into the problem facing him. His mind began to work at lightning speed. Analyzing, probing, discarding, swiftly he went over the problem as he drove the car instinctively through New Jersey.

Scipio crawled over into the back seat and went to sleep. Li Yang stretched luxuriously, holding out his plump fingers to the car heater.

"Great magic," he said with satisfaction. "Not that I believe in magic, but the word is a handy one."

The sedan thundered westward.

XV

DURING the two weeks of Court's unconsciousness, a great deal had happened. Many large cities, like Manhattan, had been evacuated. If many Carriers had appeared at once, chaos might have been the result. But the Plague came with comparative slowness at first. Martial law, of course, had been declared, resulting in less indirect mortality than might have been expected.

The refugees faced neither starvation nor epidemic. With well-oiled speed, the Federal Government had swung into action. All over the country, the evacuated populations of such cities as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and New Orleans were billeted in hospitable homes.

But the danger remained. More and

more of the carriers appeared. Shining, nebulous clouds of glowing fog, they slew by touch alone. There was no possible protection, for even lead armor was not always certain. Moreover, nobody knew the nature of these dread beings.

Court racked his brain as he furiously drove on. Parts of the pattern were falling into place. Entropy, he thought, was the clue. The most puzzling problem was the apparent existence of an utterly alien element—the mysterious X.

In a sane Universe, this could not exist. It could not be alien. For a time he pondered the Heisenberg uncertainty factor, but discarded it as a new idea came to him.

The catalyst angle was perhaps the most logical one. Absently he reached into the dashboard compartment, expecting to find cigarettes. There was a pack in it, nearly full. Court pressed in the dashboard cigarette lighter. Li Yang watched with interest.

Court took the glowing lighter and held it to his cigarette. Abruptly he paused, staring at the lighter. He whistled startledly under his breath. The Oriental blinked in astonishment.

"What—"

"An idea. Just an idea. A parallel, like conduction. Listen, Li Yang. If you take a red-hot chunk of steel and put it next to a cold piece, what'll happen?"

"The cold piece will be warmed."

"Yes. The heat will be transmitted. Only, it isn't heat in this case. It's X! X is being transmitted to living beings." Court rubbed his forehead. "What is X? Energy? Sure, but—I've got it!" He almost lost his grip on the wheel in his excitement. "I've got it, Li Yang! Entropy, life, energy—cosmic evolution!"

"Words," said the Oriental, shrugging indifferently. "What do they mean?"

Court began to talk slowly, carefully, picking his way along the new theory.

"Evolution goes on constantly, you know. From the day the first amoeba was born, evolution kept on steadily. It'll always do that, all over this Universe, and in other ones, too. Well, what's the ultimate evolution of life?"

"To what man is it given to know that?" Li Yang replied fatalistically.

"There have been lots of theories. Plenty of fiction-writers have speculated about it—people like Verne and Wells. Some of them say we'll evolve into bodiless brains. Well, that isn't quite logical. Rather, it doesn't go far enough. Brains are made of cellular tissue, and therefore can die. But thought—life energy—is the ultimate form. The final evolution is toward bodiless energy, life without form or shape. A gas, perhaps."

The Oriental nodded. "I think I see. Well?"

Court swung the sedan around a curve, taking it wide to avoid an overturned roadster.

"Entropy goes on, regardless. Eventually a Universe is destroyed. Matter itself breaks up. But this life energy isn't matter. It's left unchanged. It floats on through the void, like a dark nebula." His eyes widened. "Perhaps that's the explanation for dark nebulae, like the Coal Sack, for example. Well, that doesn't matter. This cosmic cloud of life energy drifts through space. If it happens to reach a newly formed planet like Earth billions of years ago, life is generated in the seas, and the cycle starts again. But if life already exists—"

"As on Earth now?"

"Yes. The chunk of hot steel warms the cold one. Only, it isn't heat that's transmitted. It's pure life energy, the super-life to which we'll evolve at the end of our Universe. We're not ready for that yet, but it's come of its own accord."

LI YANG said thoughtfully, "I am not sure I understand."

"Take a familiar parallel. We know today that there's a hormone which causes growth. A hormone is a glandular extract. If we inject an overdose of that into an infant, he'll grow enormous-

ly. But he'll probably be an idiot, with little control over his huge body. He should have been left to grow naturally, for he wasn't ready for the hormone in such a large dose. Neither is Earth ready for so large a step forward in evolution. But we've got an overdose of pure life energy, and it's transforming human beings into another form of life."

"Demons," Li Yang said quietly.

Court smiled uncomfortably.

"Perhaps. At least into poor devils. Well, that's the answer, but it still does not help matters.—Here's a town, and I think it has an airport."

The field was a flurry of brightly lit activity. No carriers had yet appeared in this New Jersey city, but the air of tension was inevitable. By dint of argument, threats, pleas, and coercion, Court managed to charter a plane, though he would have no success in getting a pilot. Their services were difficult to obtain, because of the national emergency. It was lucky that Court knew how to fly.

He took time to drink scalding black coffee at the airport restaurant, where curious glances were cast at his strange companions.

There was little information he could gain from the scattered scraps of conversation. No one could guess where the Plague might strike next. At the first sign of it, evacuation must take place, with the aid of every automobile, railroad, and plane that could be pressed into service.

A few local residents wandered in to stare curiously at the unusual activity. Their lives would continue in normal routine until the Plague actually arrived on their doorsteps.

Refreshed, Court took his companions nto the plane, a speedy gyrocraft cabin ship. He felt grateful that he would not have to drive by car to Wisconsin. The trip would have necessitated a stop for sleeping. But in the plane, he could reach his destination in six hours or so.

Li Yang and Scipio were not startled by the air journey, for the golden space ship had accustomed them to aerial travel. They watched with interest the countryside below. There was little chance to talk.

The plane swept over Chicago, a desolate, evacuated metropolis. Chicagoans, Court had learned, were quartered all over Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and even Ontario. Canada, of course, had thrown open its Border. For days, crowded boats had been plying between Chicago and Benton Harbor in Michigan.

The Plague had not struck Milwaukee, however, though transportation facilities were held in readiness there. Actually only a few cities had been disrupted, and Plague deaths had been surprisingly few. The real peril which not many knew, lay in the future, if the Plague spread and remained incurable.

At Madison, Court landed and rented a car.

The headlights were pale spears stabbing through the gloom as the highway unrolled monotonously. Court was beginning to feel sleepy, but he had purchased some benzedrine sulphate in Madison. He gulped some of the stimulant, which refreshed him.

In the back seat, Scipio polished his saber with an oiled rag he had found. Li Yang slept, choking and snoring, his head rolling ponderously in collars of fat.

Now and again, Court caught sight of Carriers—shining blobs of radiance that flashed toward them and were gone. What would happen if the car struck one? Would it rush through an impalpable glow, or would there be a catastrophic explosion of liberated energy? Court's mind felt so blurred that he could not think clearly. His hands ached and trembled on the wheel. His elbow joints were throbbing. The soles of his feet seemed to be on fire.

But he could not stop and rest. Home was not far now.

The road was familiar to him. Wisconsin lay under yellow moonlight, and beside the road, the river flowed along silently.

They topped a rise and came in sight of the village. It seemed unchanged. But as they swept toward it, Court noticed the absence of lights and movements.

The street was completely deserted. From the general store, a radio crackled inaudibly. On the store's porch was the body of a man in overalls, grotesquely sprawled. A dog slunk into view, stood frozen for a second, and then fled.

COURT thought with alarm of Marion Barton. Had she returned to the laboratory? Probably. But had she fled with the general exodus?

Court's heart jumped as he saw a shining, shapeless glow drift into view from around a corner. A Carrier! Another of the horrors was joining the first. But they made no effort to molest the speeding automobile.

Court sucked in his breath. Once he reached the laboratory, all the weapons of his scientific career lay ready to his fingers. Then, knowing as he now did the secret of the Plague, he could fight, perhaps destroy the plague—and finally Thordred. Marion could help. Her aid would be invaluable.

"How much farther?" Scipio grunted from the back seat.

Li Yang woke up and sleepily rubbed his eyes, yawning.

"Almost there," Court said, a queer breathlessness in his voice. "Just over this rise. Hold on!"

A glowing shadow had loomed up sinisterly before the car, blocking the road. It was a Carrier, silent, motionless, menacing.

Court made a swift decision. He could drive straight at the thing. But that was too long a chance. Going so fast, though, he had little choice.

He jammed on the brake, at the same time twisting the wheel. The car's tires rasped and screamed as the vehicle slid sideward. It rolled ominously on two wheels, righted itself, and plunged off the road.

The occupants were jolted and flung about as the sedan lurched across a plowed field. A tire blew out with a deafening report. Desperately Court fought the wheel.

Bang! Another tire had gone, but Court jammed his foot on the accelerator. In the rear mirror, he could see that the carrier was still standing in the same place. It was not pursuing them.

He got the car back on the road, picked up speed. As it limped on, the Carrier was left behind. Court drew a deep breath.

"Gods!" Scipio bellowed. "I almost stabbed myself with this blade!"

Li Yang gurgled with amusement. "You are not as well padded as I. But I am glad our journey is almost over. It is, is it not, Court?"

"Yes. This is home, and—"

Court's voice died away as he jerked the car to a halt. They were at the huge, rambling structure that had housed the laboratory. The building was gone. It had been razed to the ground in an irregular splotch of blackly charred ruin. A crater yawned among the debris.

The laboratory was destroyed, and with it, the chance to save Earth!

Sick hopelessness was so strong in Court that for a long, dreadful moment his heart was numb. He seemed to be disassociated from his body. As if he were a distant onlooker, he stared at the sharp clarity of the ruins under the Moon. His shadow stretched out before him on the ochre pathway. On one side was the taller shadow of Scipio. On the other was the obese dark blotch thrown by Li Yang's form. The grasses rustled dryly in the cool night wind.

The embers were still warm, for smoke coiled up lazily from the dying coals. Apparently the work of destruction had occurred lately. Was it an accident?

No, Thordred must be responsible! Court might have expected this. When Thordred acquired his memory pattern, he had also become familiar with the laboratory and all its potentialities. Naturally he would wish to destroy it, lest its powers be used against him.

But why had he waited two whole weeks? Perhaps because he had not been able to locate the laboratory till now. Despite having acquired Court's memories, Thordred was a stranger in this new, complicated civilization.

"Steve!"

The scream cut through the air bringing Court around sharply. It was Marion's voice!

XVI

MARION'S cry had come from the hillside beyond the house. Stephen caught the glimpse of a white figure running toward him in the bright moonlight.

He raced to meet the girl. She collapsed in his arms, panting and disheveled. Her hair was a tumbled mass of brown ringlets. For several minutes she could only gasp inarticulately.

"Steve, thank God you're safe! I saw the headlights of a car—I didn't know it was you, but I thought if you were alive you'd come back to the lab!"

Looking down into her eyes, Court felt a queer tightness in his throat. He interrupted in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"Marion, I—I love you."

The girl caught her breath as she stared. Then suddenly she smiled with dazzling brilliance.

"I'm glad," she whispered, and pressed her head against Court's chest. "I'm glad you're human, after all."

Yes, Court thought to himself, he was human. For years he had refused to admit it. But now—a chuckle started behind his lips—he gloried in it!

The others came running up, staring at Marion. She drew away from Court.

"Thordred wrecked the lab," she explained. "Who are these men?"

She eyed them inquisitively.

"No time for introductions now," Court snapped. "Tell me what's happened. You've seen Thordred, or you wouldn't know his name."

She nodded. "He came here two hours ago and destroyed the house. I was the only one who got out alive. I saw the ship not far away. When I started to run, a beam of light flashed out and I was paralyzed! A huge bearded man came running and carried me into the ship. He seemed to know who I was."

"Of course," Court agreed. "He acquired all my memories with his damned machine."

"There was a girl called Jansaiya. She didn't say anything. She just watched. Thordred showed me dozens of men and women in the ship, asleep, cataleptic. He said he had captured them to start a new civilization. He was going to another planet, and he'd decided to take me, too. Since I'd been your assistant, Steve, he figured I'd be a good assistant for him. My scientific training would be invaluable to him. He told me you were dead, that he'd killed you with a ray in New York."

"So he thinks I'm dead," Court observed. "That means he didn't know the ray only paralyzed me."

Marion didn't look at him as she continued:

"I pretended to fall in with Thordred's wishes, said I'd go with him. So he didn't bother to put me into catalepsy. He started the motors and the ship began to rise. Then I—I—"

"Go on," Court said gently.

"He wasn't watching me. I saw what he was doing at the instrument panel, and I jumped at it. Somehow I pushed all the levers and buttons before he grabbed me. The ship crashed. I wanted to kill Thordred, Steve, because I thought he'd killed you. If you were dead, I didn't want to keep on living."

For answer, Court drew the girl closer. She went on talking hurriedly.

"The ship was wrecked completely. It's right over the ridge. All the prisoners were killed, and Jansaiya was hurt. I tried to help her, but Thordred dragged me away. I don't know how he got me out alive. He was like a madman. He salvaged some weapons from the wreck, and made me go with him. I

think he wanted to kill me later, Steve. Slowly!"

Court's face was chalk-white. Clipping his words, he gave his orders.

"Let's find the ship. We may be able to salvage something, too. Li Yang, Scipio, watch out for Thordred, though I don't think he'll bother us now."

The four mounted the slope. At the top of the ridge they halted. In the valley before them lay the vast golden bulk of the space ship, near a streamlet that made a winding ribbon of quicksilver between its banks. There was no sign of life near the vessel.

They descended the slope. Suddenly Marion cried out softly and gripped Court's arm. The four halted abruptly.

A shining oval drifted into view from behind a bush. It was a Carrier, a glowing fog, fading toward its edges into invisibility. With more than human speed, it moved toward the group.

COURT instinctively thrust the girl behind him. Scipio lifted his hard fist in futile defiance. Then he remembered the saber and drew it.

But there was no defense against a Carrier, Court knew. He opened his mouth to shout a command to flee. But for some reason that he could not define, he waited.

The shining thing had halted. It was motionless, and Court was conscious of an intent regard. The creature was watching him. Why? Such a thing had never happened before. Always the Carriers had leaped eagerly, avidly, upon their prey. Why did this horror wait?

Court inexplicably felt something stir and move in his brain. Briefly the image of old Sammy, with his wrinkled brown face and his mop of white hair, rose up vividly in his mind. Behind him, Marion's voice whispered like a prayer:

"Sammy!"

The shining thing seemed to hear. It hesitated and drew back. Suddenly it turned, speeding up the slope, and vanished over the ridge.

"Good God!" Court whispered through dry lips. "Marion, do you think that was—Sammy?"

White-faced, the girl nodded.

"Yes, Steve. And I think he knew us, remembered us. That's why—" She could not go on.

"Well," Scipio broke in roughly, "why do we wait? Let's go on."

In silence, Court led the way down the slope. Presently he shivered a little, and Marion glanced sharply at him.

"Do you feel that, too?"

"What? Wait a minute, yes. Some radiation."

"There!" Li Yang said, pointing.

Court followed the gesture, saw the spot of light.

Blazing like the heart of a blue sun, flaming with a fierce and terrible radiance, the light-speck glowed upon the hull of the ship. Instantly Court guessed what it was. The atomic energy that powered the huge motors had broken free. No longer prisoned by its guarding, resistant sheath, it was sending its powerful vibrations out like ripples widening on a pool.

"Don't go any closer!" Court clutched Scipio's arm, halting him. "That's dangerous. It can fry us to a crisp."

"Gods!" The Carthaginian stared. "Is that true? A mere glow of light?"

In theory Court knew something of atomic energy, though it had never been achieved practically on Earth. In the old days, men had feared that unleashed atomic energy would destroy the whole planet, its fiery breath spreading swiftly like a poisonous infection. But Court knew there was no danger of that. The rate of matter-consumption was far too slow. In a thousand years, the valley might be eaten away, but not in five years or five minutes.

"Scipio!"

The faint cry came from nearby, startling them. The Carthaginian's hand flew to his sword as he whispered:

"Jansaiya!"

And again came the cry, plaintive, gull-sweet, infinitely sad.

"Help me!"

With a muttered oath, Scipio whirled and ran. Court followed at his heels. A mound of bushes clustered a hundred feet away, and in its shelter lay Jansaiya. The fading moonlight washed her hair with gold.

She lay broken, dying.

"Jansaiya," Scipio said tonelessly.

He dropped to his knees beside the girl and lifted her in his mighty arms. With a tired sigh, she let her head fall on his bronzed shoulder.

"My—my back."

After Court completed a hasty examination, his eyes met Scipio's. He did not need to speak, for the Carthaginian nodded slowly. Jansaiya's torn gown and bruised limbs told how she had dragged herself toward safety.

"Thordred left you?" Scipio asked in a queer, hoarse voice.

The strangely beautiful green eyes misted with pain as she held herself close to Scipio's barrel chest. The Carthaginian's gargoyle face was the color and hardness of granite in the moonlight.

"I—I think—I might have loved you—warrior," Jansaiya murmured.

Then she sobbed restrainedly with unbearable agony. The golden lashes drooped to shield the sea-green eyes. The tender lips scarcely moved as the girl whispered:

"There was not ever—any pain—in old Atlantis."

Her head drooped on his arm and was motionless.

GENTLY Scipio laid her in the shelter of the bushes. He touched her hair, her eyes, then tenderly he touched his lips to those red, silent ones, from which even the faint hint of cruelty had gone.

As he drew back, the last glow of the sinking Moon failed. The eternal dark accepted Jansaiya and shrouded her.

The starlight was cold as glittering ice on Scipio's savage eyes as he rose. He stood towering there, motionless, staring at nothingness. Slowly he turned to face the west.

"Court," he rumbled distantly, "you heard her?"

"Yes," Court said in a low, tense voice.

"He left her to die."

Abruptly the Carthaginian's face was that of a blood-ravening demon. The mighty hands flexed into talons.

"He is mine to slay!" Scipio breathed through flaring nostrils. "Remember that—he is mine to slay!"

But Jansaiya could no longer hear. She lay limp, slim and lovely and forever untouchable now, shielded from all hurt. She slept as a child might sleep.

"You wish to kill me?" a harsh voice asked mockingly. "Well, I am waiting, Scipio."

From the shadows of the bushes, Thordred's giant form rose into view.

Startled bewilderment momentarily paralyzed Court. He cursed himself for a fool. He might have expected this, but finding Jansaiya had made him relax his vigilance. Glaring at Thordred, he stepped aside to stand in front of Marion.

Li Yang's fat yellow face was expressionless.

Scipio, after one hoarse oath, had drawn his saber. He was walking forward, his eyes burning with blood-hunger.

Thordred's hand dipped into his garments, came up holding a lens-shaped crystal that shot forth a spear of green light.

It touched Scipio. The Carthaginian halted in mid-stride with the saber lifted, a grin of fury frozen on the gargoyle face.

Court leaped for Thordred, but the green ray caught him, too. The life was drained from him in a shock of icy cold. He stood motionless, paralyzed as the ray darted aside.

From the corner of his eye, Court saw Marion and Li Yang stiffen into immobility. The four stood helpless, while Thordred tossed his crystal from hand to hand and grinned.

"You fools!" his harsh voice grated.

"So I did not kill you that other time, did I, Court? Well, I shall rectify that now. If not for the interference of all of you, I should never have lost the ship. Yet I can still have my vengence." He glanced down significantly at the lens he held. "You shall die slowly, in the utmost agony. You shall burn gradually as I increase the strength of the ray. After that, I do not know what I shall do. Perhaps I can build another space ship. The knowledge I have stolen should enable me to do that. But that comes after my revenge."

The bearded face was murderous in the moonlight. The crystal flashed a ray that struck Court on the chest. The green light turned yellow. Simultaneously blinding pain racked the man. He smelled the odor of his own burning flesh.

"You shall die," Thordred gritted. "All of you! This is my vengeance."

XVII

WHEN Thordred placed Ardath's body in the small space ship and sent it hurtling toward the Sun, he had thought the Kyrian dead. His fear of Ardath's giant intellect had been so great that he would feel safe only when the solar inferno had utterly consumed it. Yet by making doubly sure that his former master would meet death, Thordred had committed a serious error.

For Ardath was not dead. He awoke slowly, painfully, only vaguely conscious of his surroundings. For a time he lay quietly, blinking and striving to understand. He kept his eyes closed after a single glance at a dazzling glare.

He turned his head away from the bright light and reopened his eyes. His gaze took in his surroundings. He was in a space ship, a small one that was unfamiliar to him. Through the ports in the walls showed the starlit blackness of interplanetary space.

He was incredibly weak. He sat up, massaging his limbs until his numbed circulation was restored to normal. Then he rose with a great effort and looked around.

Sunlight flamed through a row of ports. Ardath instantly realized that he was falling directly into the rapidly enlarging Sun. He saw the controls, sprang toward them, almost collapsing in his weakness.

He examined the unfamiliar apparatus, tentatively fingering the panel. Presently the puzzle of strangeness was solved in his amazingly swift mind. He tried a lever, then another, and knew that he was master of the unknown ship. The vital problem just now was to escape from the Sun's attraction.

Luckily he was not yet even close to the chromosphere. He turned the vessel in a wide arc. After staring through the ports, he aimed its nose at Earth. Then he locked the controls and searched for food.

Foreseeing emergencies, Court had stocked the little ship well. Much of the food was unfamiliar to Ardath, but he sampled it intelligently. Brandy stimulated him and gave him strength. As he ate, he pondered the situation.

How had he got here? What had awakened him from his cataleptic sleep? The last thing he remembered was emerging from the laboratory in his own ship, to encounter Thordred's ruthless blow. The bearded giant had betrayed him, but how long ago had that been? How long had Ardath slept?

During his last period of awakening, he had arranged an automatic alarm which would react to the presence of any unusual mentality existing on Earth. Ardath wished to take no chances of sleeping past the lifetimes of geniuses. But he had not had time to set that alarm before Thordred stunned him. Everyone in the golden ship should have slept on until infinity, unless awakened by some outside force. What had that been?

Again Ardath went to a port and studied the constellations, noting the changes that time had made. He computed roughly that at least twenty cen-

turies had elapsed since his last awakening. Perhaps, through his failure to set the automatic alarm, he had already slept through the lifetimes of innumerable super-mentalities.

Though Ardath did not know it, of course, he had not awakened to find Moses, Confucius, Socrates, Galileo, Newton and a dozen others. The alarm, had it been set, would have aroused him when those men appeared on Earth.

Ardath glanced thoughtfully toward the Sun. Its powerful rays, unshielded by any atmosphere, had awakened him. He felt gratitude to the unknown builder of this ship, who had installed transparent ports, through which the vital radiations had poured. If the vessel had been on any other course, Ardath might have slept on to the end of time. But the sun's rays had destroyed the artificial catalepsy.

Ardath rose and began to search the little ship. Its architecture was obviously terrestrial, the natural development of art-forms he had seen in ancient days on Earth. Moreover, the use of Earth metals in the construction, and the absence of any unusual ones, confirmed this theory.

Certain equipment that Ardath found interested him. The mystery of a blow-torch he solved without difficulty. An electro-magnet and vials of acids made him nod thoughtfully. When he measured one of the ports carefully, he realized that it coincided exactly with the size and shape of the entry-ports on his own ship.

The equipment indicated that the unknown owner of this little vessel had expected to find a barrier difficult to pass. The curious similarity of the ports on both ships added up to an unescapable conclusion. Someone on Earth had built this ship in order to reach and enter Ardath's craft. Obviously he had succeeded, but without the use of atomic energy.

HE HAD duplicated the alloy that coated the hull of the Kyrian vessel, yet the energy was electrical in nature. Ardath's race had used electricity once, so many eons ago that it was mere legend when he had been born. Atomic energy had supplanted it. Yet Ardath must work with the tools at hand.

He found himself experiencing difficulty in breathing. The air supply, of course, had not bothered him during his cataleptic state, but now it was becoming a problem. He examined the air-renewers and purifiers, found them simple but effective.

Luckily there were the necessary chemicals aboard the ship to renew the exhausted apparatus. The names on the containers meant nothing to Ardath, but the chemicals were easily recognizable. In only one case did he find a test necessary.

It would be a long journey back to Earth. Meanwhile, Ardath examined some maps and charts that had been in a cupboard, as well as a popular novel which one of the workmen who built the ship had left in a corner and forgotten. These would be invaluable for learning the language. Since Ardath already knew Latin from his last period of awakening, he could learn English without too much difficulty. He could even approximate the present pronunciation, once he understood the letters—like "w," which Romans did not have. The luckiest find of all, after that, was a newspaper.

Two problems faced Ardath—he must find his own ship, and he needed a weapon. Painstakingly he analyzed the situation.

Day after day dragged on while the space ship fled toward Earth. The Kyrian studied the charts, the book, and the newspaper, striving to understand. From a rubber stamp on the maps, he learned that the owner of the vessel was named Stephen Court, and that he lived in Wisconsin, near a town which Ardath finally located on one of the charts.

That became his destination. The Kyrian's keen understanding of psychology aided him in understanding

what had happened during his unconsciousness. Placing himself in the respective positions of Thordred and Stephen Court, he applied rules of logic.

When Court had entered the golden space ship and found the cataleptic bodies, he would naturally have tried to awaken them. When he awoke Thordred, what had happened?

There were two possibilities. Thordred, Ardath realized now, wanted power above all else. He had resented the Kyrian's domination. After apparently succeeding in killing his former master, he would not have been willing to obey Court. Rather, his lust for power would have been given fresh fuel.

He and Court would have become either enemies or friends. In the latter case, Ardath now faced two opponents. But why should Court, having built this ingenious and expensive space ship, have been willing to destroy it by aiming it at the Sun? He would naturally have wished to retain it for later use. A logical man does not destroy valuable equipment, and only a logical and intelligent person could have built this vessel.

But Thordred, on the other hand, would have wished the smaller ship destroyed, so that he would possess the only space ship on Earth. Such tactics would strengthen his power. Unless there were already other space-craft in existence.

That was impossible. This one was obviously patterned on Ardath's own vessel. A man with sufficient knowledge to create it would have used it, first of all, to visit the original ship. That sounded logical, though not entirely certain.

Court would probably have resented the destruction of his property. That indicated that he and Thordred were enemies. But from that conclusion, Ardath could go no further. He could only wait until he had reached Earth and visited the home of Stephen Court in Wisconsin. If Court lived, he would certainly be an ally.

And now Ardath concentrated on creating a weapon. Equipment was at hand, and electricity. Atomic energy Ardath could not manufacture at present, but he thought it would not be necessary. Already he had a plan for a weapon in mind.

It must be able to convey a strong shock, or even a fatal one, over quite a distance. That necessitated some conductor of the current. A jet of water—a thin spray, perhaps—might do the trick. But the use of ordinary water was not quite satisfactory.

ARDATH began to experiment with the limited laboratory he had at his command.

He worked arduously, sleeping and eating only when he found time, while the ship sped toward its destination.

Earth grew from a star to a spinning globe, cloud-sheathed, and then into a vast concave disk that blotted out the starry void. Ardath found the outline of North America, checked it with his maps. Then he sent the vessel arrowing toward Lake Michigan, which was visible even from beyond the atmosphere.

It was night before he landed outside the village near Court's home. He lowered the ship silently among concealing trees and slipped toward the lights of the settlement.

His clothing would arouse curiosity, he realized, but that could not be helped. Taking his new weapon, which was awkwardly bulky, he moved forward.

Luck was with him. A youth, idling along the highway in a dim stretch, paused to stare at Ardath. The Kyrian took advantage of the opportunity. Mouthing the unfamiliar words carefully, he asked:

"Can you say where Stephen Court lives?" It soundéd like: "Cah yoh-uh say vhere Stephen Coo-urt liv-es?"

The boy blinked. "Sure. You're a foreigner, ain't you?"

When no answer came, he went on, pointing.

"Right up the road here." He gave explicit directions. "But I wouldn't go up there if I was you. There was a fire up there just a little while ago, and folks saw some funny kind of airship hanging around. They think it crashed in the valley behind the house; but nobody's gone to look. We stay away from Court's place since he had a case of the plague there."

Without a word, Ardath left the lad and hurried on. He had understood most of what had been said. "A funny kind of airship?" Could that be the golden space vessel? By the gods, if it had crashed—

The ruins of the house told their own story. Ardath hesitated, then skirted it to clmb up the slope beyond the charred foundations.

"The valley behind the house," the boy had said. Ardath topped the ridge. His thin, patrician face went cold as marble at the sight before him. The ship was wrecked, he saw at a glance. And he saw, too, the moonlit figures of huge Thordred and his paralyzed prisoners.

The ray flashed out from the lens in Thordred's hand, and Ardath ran swiftly down the slope, concealing himself amid the bushes. As an odor of charred flesh came to his nostrils, his eyes were suddenly remorseless as death.

At last he was close enough. He rose from the shadows and called softly:

"Thordred!"

The bearded giant whirled, shocked amazement in the amber eyes. The yellow ray swung wide, out of his control. Simultaneously Ardath lifted the weapon he held, and a thin jet of fluid shot from its muzzle, splashing on Thordred's arm. The giant yelled in agony, and his lens fell to the ground.

"You betrayed me, Thordred," Ardath said emotionlessly. "It is just that you die."

He stepped forward. The huge, bearded figure swayed and writhed in agony, striving to break free from the invisible grip that held it. Ardath's foot slipped on a rounded stone. For a second, the liquid jet wavered from its mark. But swept back swiftly.

Thordred was gone. He flung himself back into the shelter of the bushes. The crashing of underbrush told of his flight.

Ardath shrugged and lowered his weapon.

"He is harmless now," he said, and bent to pick up the lens. Briefly he eyed the three men and the girl, still paralyzed. "Scipio, Li Yang, and two strangers."

He made a hasty adjustment on the crystal, sent a blue glow sweeping out to bathe the four. The paralysis fled.

"Ardath!" Li Yang said. "You came in good time."

"By the gods, yes!" Scipio roared. His voice went soft with regret. "Though not in time to save Jansaiya." His eyes clouded. Lifting his saber, he plunged forward. "I'll be back with Thordred's head," he promised over his shoulder, and vanished into the woods.

"You—you're Ardath?" Court asked.

THE burn on his chest was aching painfully, but it was not deep, and it had been automatically cauterized. He stared at the rescuer. The Kyrian nodded.

"I am Ardath. You seem to know of me. Are you Stephen Court?"

"Yes. But how did you learn English? How did you escape from the Sun trap? What—"

"Wait." Ardath was staring down at the wrecked ship. "Before all else, the atomic energy must be prisoned again. It is" —he fumbled for the right word—"dangerous. To approach it closely means death."

"Lead?" Court suggested.

When Ardath looked puzzled, he gave the atomic number.

"Only a special alloy will insulate the rays of atomic energy. Do you see that container? It looks like a speck from here, beside the spot of light. Only that can hold the power." He frowned. "The

power must be placed in its sheath again. "But—"

"It means death," Li Yang broke in. "Very well, I shall do it."

Court clutched the fat arm.

"You need not sacrifice yourself."

Ardath's face was expressionless as he went on in his painful, stilted English, "Whoever goes must be quick. The rays kill swiftly. Hurry to the ship, slide the container over the little globe of atomic energy, and put the cover in place. That is all. After that, it will be safe to approach."

"Steve," Marion said unsteadily, "let me go!"

"No!" Court's arm went around the girl, drawing her close. "Not you. Do we need to make this sacrifice, Ardath?"

The Kyrian nodded, sorrowfully.

"The energy will spread out till it touches ores. Then it will expand faster, until Earth itself will be destroyed."

There was a sudden interruption. From the bushes behind the group, a glowing nimbus of light drifted. It was a Carrier, but it did not approach the three. Instead, it sped down the slope, toward the ship. Ardath stared.

"Marion, do you suppose—" Court said hoarsely.

"Maybe, Steve. If that was Sammy, he may have heard us."

They watched as the weird Carrier fled toward the ship. It reached the hull, bent over and picked up a small object from the ground. It made a swift motion—and the glare of atomic energy vanished!

"He did hear us," Court exulted. "Good old Sammy!"

The light nimbus was drifting away toward the other side of the valley. Presently it was hidden from sight, but before that Ardath was striding down to the ship.

He returned, holding in his hands an oval container of dark, lustrous metal. It was the sheath for the atomic energy.

"We have much to talk about," he said to Court. "Your language—I must master it better."

Scipio came back, cursing and swinging his saber. His deep chest rose and fell as he panted.

"Thordred got away. I could not catch him."

Court took immediate command.

"Back to the road. There's plenty of room in the car. We'll head directly for Washington and make plans. I think you can help us against the Plague, Ardath. Your atomic energy has already given me an idea."

"The Plague?" Ardath asked. "I'll help, if I can. But I am sorry you did not destroy Thordred, Scipio. I fear he will trouble us again."

The Carthaginian did not answer. He grinned unpleasantly, fingering the saber blade, as he followed the others back toward the ridge.

XVIII

TWO weeks later found Court haggard and red-eyed with exhaustion. He and Ardath, aided by Li Yang, Scipio and Marion, had been working day and night, experimenting, testing, discarding. Court's task had been complicated by the difficulty of securing the Government's backing. The President, though in favor of Court's proposal, would not give his consent until the country's foremost scientists had approved.

"They still don't realize what we're up against," Court told Marion.

The two were walking toward a huge white auditorium on Pennsylvania Avenue. The dome of the Capitol loomed against the blue sky. A number of cars were drawn up before the marble building.

"But they know what the Plague's doing," Marion said worriedly. "New cases every day!"

"I know. Perhaps I shouldn't have asked for as much money as I did, yet we'll need it all. Small weapons aren't enough. We've got to build the Shield to save Earth."

"Well, today's the day," she reminded. "All the scientists will be there, with

lots of Army officials and Washington bigwigs."

Court smiled. "Yes. I hope—"

He turned into an alcove and picked up a phone. Presently he asked:

"Scipio? All set? Good. Be careful, now." He turned back to Marion. "This may be dangerous, but I think it'll do the trick."

Before long, he was on the stage of the auditorium, a lithe, well-built figure against a background of sable curtains. The room was nearly filled with scientists, uniformed Army men, politicians. A rustle of expectancy went through them as Court appeared. Without preamble he began:

"I am going to ask you to witness—" He paused as cameramen's flashlight bulbs popped and glared. "All right, boys. Save some of your plates till later. You will need them. To resume, I am going to perform an experiment for you today. Most of you are already familiar with my proposal. I have found a cure for the Plague, but it is an expensive one. On the other hand, it is the only possible way to save the human race from extinction."

"Bunk!" a voice yelled. "Prove it!"

Court lifted his hand.

"One moment. You have all read about Ardath. Some of you, I think, have seen my colleague. His strange history has become familiar to you. Let me introduce him now."

Ardath walked out on the platform. His antique clothing had been replaced by a well-fitting suit of light flannels, and his slim figure went over to stand beside Court. The lean, patrician face looked out over the audience without expression.

"Fake!" a cry arose. It was echoed by others.

A gray-haired man stood up.

"If you've found a cure for the Plague, prove it. This Ardath may be an imposter. He probably is. He has nothing to do with—"

Ardath did not say a word, but he stepped forward a pace. Something in the look of the strange, alien eyes brought silence to the auditorium. In the stillness, Court spoke again.

"You know that the Plague is fatal. To touch a Carrier means instant death. There is no possible insulation. I have already given my theories about the origin of the Plague. It is sheer life energy, the ultimate evolution of all life, the residuum of some immeasurably ancient Universe that evolved into pure energy perhaps eons ago. This cosmic cloud of energy has drifted through the interstellar void until its edges infringe upon Earth. Some catalyst in our atmosphere made it potent, infected our life forms with this strange virus. What the Plague does is simply this—it speeds up entropy. And the evolution that takes place is abnormal, against nature."

Court paused, drew a deep breath, and resumed:

"Normal evolution is slow. Mankind automatically adjusts to different environment through the course of ages. But this is a sudden jump to the ultimate life form, which in the normal course of events should not exist in this System for billions of years. That disrupts the evolutionary check-and-balance system. Humanity is not yet ready for this metamorphosis. It must come slowly and gradually, over a period of millions of years. Let me sketch for you the future.

"More and more of the Carriers will appear as Earth plunges deeper into the heart of the cloud of life energy. The Carriers will feed on those who were once their fellows. Eventually only they will exist on this planet, and even they will die in the end for lack of sustenance. In less than fifty years, the world will be a barren, dead sphere drifting through space. That is what it might have been, had we not found a cure!"

THEN the Kyrian's clipped, precise voice rang through the auditorium. "Court speaks truly. You men of this

civilization are strange to me. Perhaps few of you believe the story of my origin. That does not matter. Working together, Court and I have discovered the nature of the Plague and found a solution. It is this: The Carriers are forms of life energy. They can be destroyed, but only by creating a stronger type of energy which will drain their own. Only one thing will do that—atomic power. A certain carrier came in touch with the unguarded atomic power in my space ship. Later, we searched for him, and found his body near the vessel. Exposure to the terrific energy had killed him."

Court nodded, remembering how he and Ardath had hunted through the Wisconsin hills for Sammy, and the burned, inhuman thing they had found at last.

The Kyran went on: "Atomic power short-circuits the carriers, drains their energy. Already we have constructed portable weapons which are thoroughly satisfactory."

"But the life-cloud in space!" a voice from the audience broke in. "You can't destroy that!"

The Kyrian smiled grimly.

"True. And more and more carriers will appear as we approach the nucleus of the cloud. But we can protect Earth, create a wall around it, a shell of atomic energy! With the right machines, we can transform the Heaviside Layer into a shield that will perfectly insulate this planet against the cosmic cloud. Solar radiation will still come through unchecked. But not a trace of the deadly life energy will be able to penetrate the Shield."

A low murmuring in the auditorium grew into a roar. Men rose and shouted questions, challenges at Ardath. A shield around Earth? Ridiculous! Such fantastic pipe-dreams belonged with perpetual motion and other exploded theories. Ardath glanced wryly at Court.

"Well, I see I can't convince them. Shall we—"

Court was waving his arms, trying to quiet the crowd. His attempts were useless. Already some members of the audience were rising and heading for exits.

No one saw Court wave toward the wings. But all eyes turned to the stage when the black curtain rustled apart. Simultaneously a gasp of sheer horror ripped from hundreds of throats.

On the platform was—*a carrier!*

A huge box of luminous metal stood just behind it, in which the horror had apparently been confined. It was open now, and the luminous fog that constituted the Carrier was drifting forward with purposeful intent.

Ardath and Court had raced to one side of the stage. Scipio appeared, wheeling a small contrivance no larger than a dictaphone. A conical tube topped it, ending in a translucent lens.

"Good," Court snapped at the Carthaginian. "But for God's sake, be careful now!"

The giant nodded with a flash of white teeth. Court turned to the paralyzed audience.

"Stay where you are! There's no danger, unless you get hysterical and riot."

A uniformed man in the aisle shouted an oath and whipped out his revolver. He pumped bullets at the glowing creature. Naturally there was no result. Court waited till the echoes had died.

"No one will deny that this is an authentic Carrier. Watch!"

The creature was at the edge of the platform when Scipio swung his weapon to focus upon it. The result was unspectacular. A ray of intense white light struck from the lens, and the glow surrounding the Carrier merely began to fade. The thing remained motionless, all its glory dulling.

At last there was only something like a mummy collapsing, to lie motionless on the stage. Scipio switched off the light.

"Take your seats, please," Court said. "I have no more surprises for you. I shall welcome a committee to examine

the body of this Carrier."

The first man to hasten down the aisle was a strongly built, handsome man with grizzled hair. He went directly to Court.

"Mr. President!" Court cried. "I didn't know you intended to be here, or I wouldn't have—"

"I'm glad you did make that experiment," said the President of the United States. "I doubt if the scientists will fail to approve your plan now." There was a little twinkle in the level gray eyes. "Even if they do, I have authority under martial law to order you to build your Earth Shield, and to give you every assistance you require."

The big figure turned toward the audience, and the President waved at the group of reporters.

"Put that on your front pages, boys. Stephen Court's in charge. . . ."

WITH silent, incredible speed, Earth swung into action to fight the cosmic menace. Stephen Court was in charge. Beside him Ardath worked, untiring, unsparing of himself. Li Yang, Scipio, and Marion Barton lent their aid.

Stacks of trained scientists gathered from all over the world. Factories were hastily commandeered, and their machinery altered so they could turn out quantities of the atomic energy potable guns.

From San Francisco to New York, from New Orleans to Chicago, trained men went busily to work. Production of the guns was left to subordinates. Once provided with the plans, they executed their orders with swift precision.

Troops of militia were armed with the weapons and sent into Plague-infested areas. New York was cleared of the Carriers, and other cities as well. Dozens of the guns were stored in airports, ready for instant transportation whenever a case of the Plague was reported. Such reports were constant these days. Earth was approaching dangerously close to the nucleus of the cosmic cloud.

Ardath flew to China, with Li Yang and two hundred famous scientists. A job had to be done there. Two gigantic towers had to be erected, on each side of Earth—one in the Orient, one in America. Court was in charge of constructing the latter. He remained in constant telephonic communication with Ardath.

Speed was essential. Every resource of the country was turned to building the Earth Shield. Business was neglected. The Government issued orders delegating certain jobs to certain groups. The people had to be fed, of course, but every capable man was mustered to the task for which he was best fitted. Factories worked day and night.

Every other country lent its aid. Cananda, England, Germany, France, Italy, Japan—all forgot their imperialistic and trade quarrels in order to battle the common enemy. There was no time for war.

Build the Towers! Create the Earth Shield! These aims were foremost.

Slowly the mighty obelisks rose. They resembled the Eiffel Tower, but were far taller and larger. Immense girders buckled huger beams together as the monoliths rose against the sky day by day. Faster, faster, the men worked.

At night, searchlights were used. New roads were built and old ones widened, all converging on the Towers. A railroad was laid to each one from the nearest line.

Nearby towns found themselves incredibly augmented in populations. Emergency barracks rose. Dapper physicists and chemists slept side by side with burly roustabouts and riveters.

No thought of class, and few quarrels, arose. Each man knew that the Plague might strike his own family next. Under his breath he whispered:

Build the Earth Shield! *Hurry! Hurry!*"

Two Towers loomed at last, visible for many miles. Each one was topped with a shimmering, bright sphere of metal, fifty feet in diameter. From these

globes the atomic energy would flame out, to encircle the planet and transform the atomic structure of the Heaviside Layer into an impregnable barrier.

XIX

COURT had little time to rest. He had frequent reports from the Chief of the F.B.I., whom he had requested to track down the vanished Thordred. But the bearded giant had disappeared without trace. His continued presence meant danger, however, for Thordred possessed the knowledge he had stolen from the minds of both Ardath and Court. The dragnet searched for him vainly.

One night Court, Scipio and Marion stood in the control room just beneath the huge globe that topped the Tower. The task was finished. The last workman had just departed in the elevator that led to the ground. The three stood quietly, staring out at the land that stretched far beneath them. Bright moonlight bathed everything weirdly, yet beautifully.

The room was fifty feet square, a flat platform around which a low railing ran. There were no walls. Metal supports stood up like thick columns at intervals. The globe above their head was hollow, else not even the tough reinforced steel of the Tower could have supported its weight.

They could not see the sphere. Nine feet above their heads, the ceiling was plated with thickness after thickness of Ardath's alloy, the only thing that would halt the radiation of atomic energy. Court fumbled with a televisor.

"Wish I'd had this finished weeks ago," he complained. "Ardath showed me how to build it, but I didn't have time. Let's see—"

The screen ran riot with color that swiftly faded into a uniform gray.

"Trying for China?" Marion asked, coming to stand close to Court.

He nodded.

"The other Tower. I'm getting it. Here it is!"

On the screen, the fat, butter-colored face of Li Yang appeared. The beady black eyes stared.

"Court? Hello. How is the work?"

"All finished," Court sighed. "We're just waiting for you. Bolted the last connection half an hour ago."

"Fine!" the Oriental applauded. "We'll be ready tomorrow, perhaps sooner. Wait a moment. Here's Ardath."

The Kyrien's thin, ascetic face replaced that of Li Yang. His eyes were red-rimmed with fatigue.

"So you're finished, Court," he said. "Good. My workmen were not much slower. We'll be done in a few hours, not tomorrow, Li Yang. Then we can turn on the power. Don't forget"—Ardath's lips thinned—"we must be careful. Both of us must turn on the switches at exactly the same moment. Otherwise there will be disaster. The atomic screen must meet just halfway around Earth. If you turn on your power too soon, your energy screen will smash mine back and destroy this Tower completely. We must be completely accurate."

Court glanced at an instrument panel near him.

"I will. Wait a minute. Someone's coming up in the elevator."

The warning bell was ringing. Presently the lift rose into view. An overalled figure, half hidden under the weight of a wooden box, stepped out of the cage.

Scipio turned from where he had been leaning on the rail and staring down into the black gulf. He peered at the workman. Marion's brows drew together in puzzement.

"What's this? she asked. "We didn't—"

The box fell crashing to the floor. The face of the man behind it was revealed. It was no longer bearded; clean-shaven now, and with the hair bleached yellow. Yet the arrogant mouth, hawk nose and the tawny amber eyes could belong to only one man.

Thordred!

His hand swept up, a lens blinking in it bluely. The mouth gaped in a snarl.

"Don't move!" His voice shook with mad fury. "Don't move a muscle. I've come back!"

Court still stood before the televisor. On the screen he saw Ardath's face watching, immobile and intent. He glimpsed a heavy wrench that was lying forgotten on the ledge of the televisor. It was hidden from Thordred's view by the instrument's bulk. Court let his hand gently close over it.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You can't possibly escape."

Thordred laughed harshly. "No, you saw to that. Your police have come after me. If I hadn't stolen your memories, I'd never have escaped them. I disguised myself as a workman and rode up here. Nobody stopped me. And I have a weapon now! I made it, with the knowledge and memories I took from Ardath."

MARION'S face was paper-white. Scipio stood motionless, his gigantic hands gripping the rail behind him.

"What do you intend to do?" Court asked.

"Kill you!" Thordred rasped. "Then I'll turn on the power—I know how to do that—and the energy will destroy Ardath in his Tower. With you two out of the way, I can rule Earth. My brain, with the combined knowledge of yours and his, is wiser than any other in the world."

"You may do that," Court admitted, warily watching for an opening, "but what about the Plague?"

"I haven't forgotten that. The Towers can be repaired. The Earth Shield can be created, even without you and Ardath. But then I shall rule this planet!"

Softly, without moving his lips, Court whispered into the televisor:

"Turn on your power, Ardath. It'll destroy Thordred. We'll go with it, but that's the only way."

The Kyrian did not speak, but he shook his head slightly. Thordred moved forward. The blue lens in his hand lifted.

"Now, he said. "Now you die!"

Court's muscles tensed for a hopeless leap. He knew he could not reach the man in time. His fingers tightened over the wrench. Scipio had not moved. His eyes were aglow.

Murder-lust sprang into Thordred's dark face. He aimed the crystal—

"Thordred!"

Ardath's voice rang out from the televisor. Startled, Thordred involuntarily glanced toward the instrument. Simultaneously on the screen a beam of blinding white light flashed from Ardath's hand. It flamed into Thordred's eyes, blinding him.

Roaring, the giant shook his head, a ray of blue radiance spearing wildly from the lens he held. Court snatched up the wrench and hurled it with all his strength. It struck Thordred's hand. The lens was hurled away, to shatter on the metallic floor.

Ready to hurl himself at Thordred, Court was halted by Scipio's bull voice. The Carthaginian roared:

"Back, Court! He is mine—mine to slay!"

No longer blinded by the ray, Thordred turned to face this new menace. With the snarl of a cornered beast, he closed with his attacker. The mighty, hair-covered hands closed about Scipio's throat. The Carthaginian tore them away, and the two men gripped each other about the waist.

They reeled back and forth, each striving to throw the other. To and fro on the platform they wrestled, hundreds of feet above the ground. Staggering to the railed brink and back, Thordred bellowed with insane rage. His mouth gaped open as he sought to sink his teeth in Scipio's throat.

The Carthaginian swung his fist in a short arc. The power of the blow brought blood gushing from Thordred's cheek.

Court and Marion—and, on the screen, Ardath and Li Yang—watched the two Titans battle. The men were well matched. Thordred was the taller, but Scipio seemed to weigh a trifle more. Yet the raging, murderous frenzy that filled them both was exactly equal.

Abruptly Thordred drove a foul blow at Scipio's middle. The Carthaginian grunted, and his guard dropped for a moment. Instantly Thordred hurled himself upon his opponent. The two went down, Thordred on top. The hairy hands again sank in Scipio's corded throat.

Court sprang forward, the wrench again in his hand. Scipio turned his head slightly. His deep voice roared a warning:

"Back, Court! He is mine to slay!"

Then the iron hands of the gladiator from Carthage found their mark—the throat of the savage from Earth's youth.

And they sank deep, deep! All the tremendous strength in Scipio's muscles seemed to flow into his arms. Cords and knots stood out under his bronzed skin.

Thordred's face was suddenly gorged with purple. Blood stained his shaved chin, began trickling down. Desperately he strove to throttle his opponent. Abandoning the effort, he released his grip and stabbed his fingers down at Scipio's eyes.

The Carthaginian expertly rolled his head, and the foul thrust missed its mark.

Thordred was suddenly clawing at the terrible hands that shut off his breath. His body jerked and writhed like a hooked fish. His eyes were distended and protruding. Frantically he tried to tear himself free, and could not.

"You left her to die," Scipio whispered.

Court knew that he spoke of Jansaiya, the Atlantean priestess.

ONE last frightful effort Thordred made. Something snapped with a brittle, crackling report. Simultaneously the giant flung himself up with one uncoiling motion. He stood upright, amber eyes glaring, breath hissing and rattling into his starved lungs.

Suddenly the huge head lolled forward slackly on its broken neck. For a heart-beat, Thordred stood silhouetted against the dark sky. Then he crashed lifeless to the floor.

Scipio sprang up. He heaved up the heavy body of Thordred and went staggering toward the railing. He flung the body out into the abyss, and stared after it with brooding eyes.

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"Your vengeance, Jansaiya," he whispered. "And mine!"

Then Scipio Agricola Africanus, the man from Carthage, put his head down on his arms. He began to weep great, choking sobs that ripped harshly from his throat.

Court looked away in sympathy and walked toward the televisor screen. Against it Marion leaned, faint with reaction. Both Ardath and Li Yang were watching. Though the Oriental's gross yellow face was immobile, his lacquer eyes were suddenly aglow with pity.

"Ohe," Li Yang sighed softly. "Alas for such men as Scipio, who find neither thrones nor love."

Ardath turned when a man appeared behind him on the screen. After a few words, he faced Court.

"The work has been done sooner than

I expected. We can turn on the power now. Compare your chronometer with mine."

The two delicate time-pieces checked precisely.

"At exactly eleven, throw your switch," Ardath instructed. "I shall do the same."

There were ten seconds to go—five—three—

Court's hand trembled on the switch.

Two. One—

Now!

Deafening thunder bellowed out from the summit of the Tower. For miles around, the roaring blast shattered windows and awakened sleepers to panicky fright. White light made the country bright as day. For a second, the maelstrom of raving light and sound continued. Then it swiftly died. There was silence, save for a low humming.

"Good!" Ardath said on the screen. "We timed it exactly right. In two minutes, watch the sky. If it lights up, we have succeeded."

With one accord, Court and Marion hurried to the railing. Even Scipio lifted his head to stare at the black sky.

Two minutes to wait. The incredible barrier of electrons, the curtain of atomic energy, was rushing around Earth, spreading out from the points of origin in the twin Towers.

One minute dragged by. Then, without warning, the sky turned white. The dim stars vanished. A curtain of pallid white brilliance hung over Earth, like a shining ivory bowl overturned upon the land.

A single heart-beat it remained, then faded and was gone. But Court knew that the Earth Shield had been created. That barrier would forever safeguard mankind.

"We've won!" His voice was hoarse with triumph. "Marion, we've saved humanity!"

There was something inexpressibly tender in the girl's eyes as she watched him. For now she knew that Stephen Court was a man whom she could love and cherish, not a cold, inhuman machine. In the hour of his triumph, he exulted not because he had solved a terrible problem with his keen brain. Court rejoiced because he had saved human beings from horror and death.

"Yes," Marion said softly, "we've won, Steve. Both of us have won what we wanted."

From the metallic sphere overhead, invisible energy flared out, challenging the stars at it poured its mighty power into the Earth Shield. . . .

EPILOGUE

ONE year later, a little group stood on the Wisconsin hills, examining a huge golden space ship that loomed against the green slope and the summer sky. It had taken months to build a new vessel to Ardath's specifications. But at last the task had been finished, the equipment installed, and provisions taken aboard. In every respect, the craft was a duplicate of the Kyrian original, save for a few new devices which Ardath and Court had perfected.

Scipio, Li Yang and Ardath stood together at the open air-lock, Marion and Court a few feet away. It was difficult to find words at this moment of sad farewell.

"I am sorry you will not go with us, both of you," Ardath said after a time. "Yet you may be right."

"You know how I feel about it," Court returned. "The Plague is destroyed. It will never come again, thanks to the Earth Shield. But new dangers may arise. These people among whom I was born are my people. I must be ready to serve and help them. I think that was the reason I was given a mind evolved beyond my time. I can help in so many ways, Ardath. There is so much I can do to improve this world of mine. Already, in one year, strides have been made. Atomic power has outlawed war. When I die, I want to die in a Utopia that I have helped to build."

Ardath nodded with an understand-

ing. "I came through time to find a supermind whom I could abduct to start a new race. Well, I have found that supermind—and you are wiser than I, Stephen Court. We are all part of some cosmic pattern, and this pattern works toward good and not evil. It builds and does not destroy. So I shall go on in my search for a race where I can find kinship and happiness. Perhaps, a thousand years from now, I shall stand beside your grave, Court."

"I, too," Scipio broke in. "Your world is a fine one, Court, and some of it I like. But I follow a dream. Mayhap I can carve out a kingdom in some distant future." His face was suddenly somber. "I cannot stay here. Jansaiya died here, and that would always be an aching pain in my heart."

"Nor will I remain," Li Yang murmured. "Perhaps it is merely curiosity that impels me to go on with Ardath. I do not know. But the unknown has a certain fascination, and I am anxious to know what will exist a million years from now. So farewell, and"—his mouth twisted grotesquely—"do not forget fat old Li Yang."

The gross figure turned hastily and disappeared into the ship.

Scipio bent and touched his lips to Marion's brow before he squeezed Court's hand in a mighty grip.

"The gods watch over you," he rumbled, and was gone inside.

Now Ardath's strange, alien eyes dwelt on the faces of Marion and Court.

"There is nothing I can say," he whispered. "Only farewell."

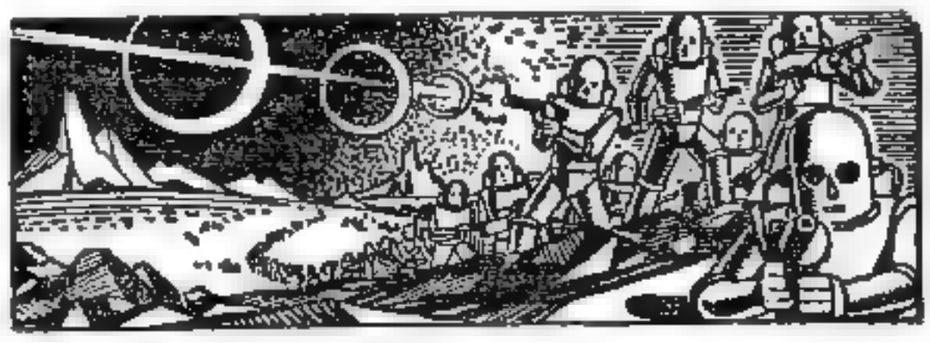
Some indefinable bond of kinship between minds flashed for an instant as Court and Ardath gazed into each other's eyes. Then the Kyrian stepped back into the ship and the port swung shut.

The vessel lifted. It rose silently and dwindled against the blue, a bright golden ovoid that faded to a speck and was out of sight. It sped toward the orbit it would follow around Earth, perhaps for thousands of years, until Ardath and Scipio and Li Yang awoke to follow their strange destiny.

Two figures stood close together on the slope. Marion and Court looked up until all trace of the golden ship was gone.

There was only the blue sky then, and the green hills of Wisconsin.

Still silent, and with the man's arm holding the girl's slim form close to him, they turned to retrace their steps to the highway, where a car waited. There was nothing they could say, and no need for words had they found any.



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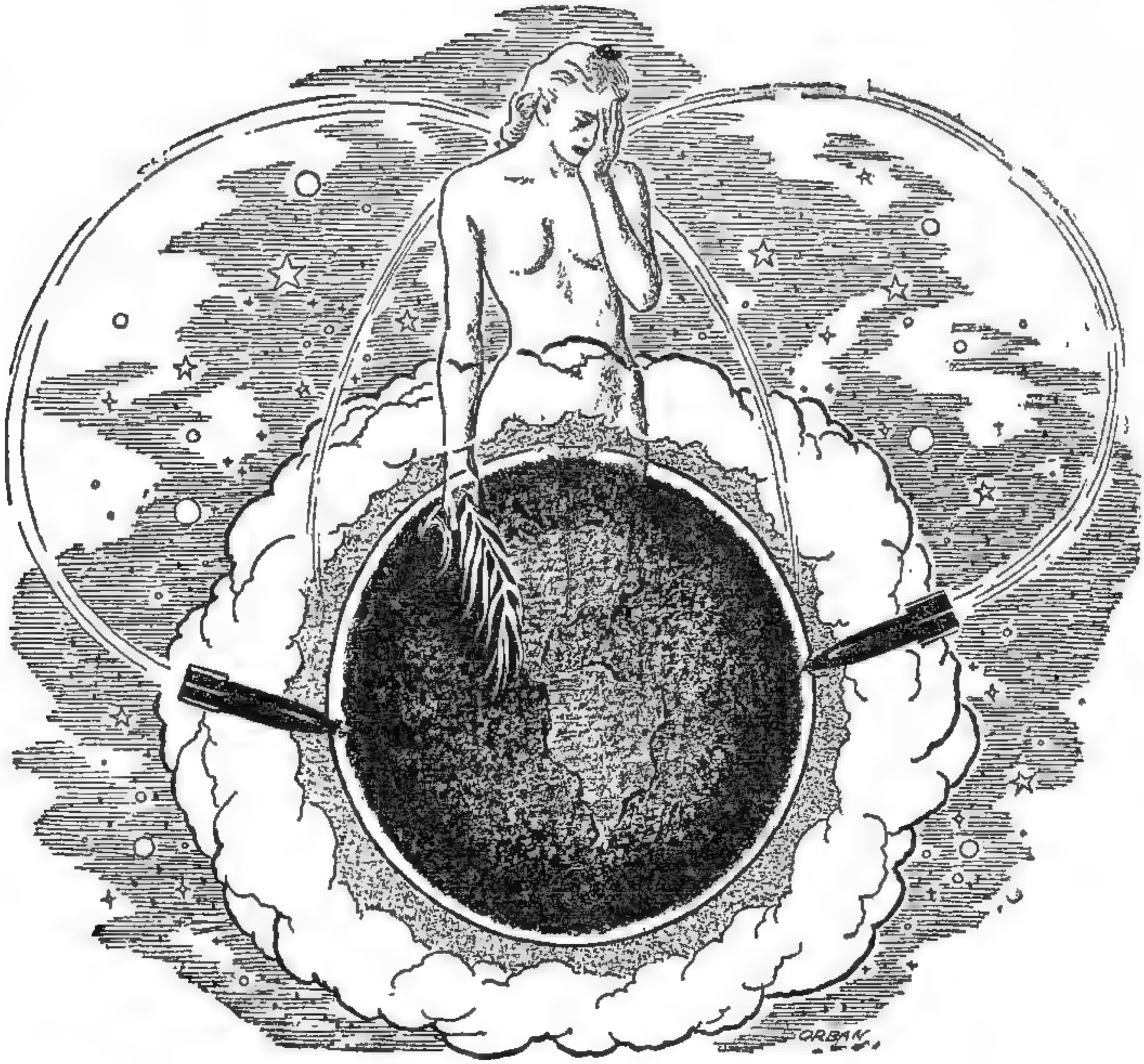

Second Chance

by Walter Kubilius
and
Fletcher Pratt

GENERAL-OF-THE-ARMIES Alvin Weinburger jabbed stubby fingers at the map, spearing the chief cities of the Cominworld. The little circle of six tarnished stars on his collar glinted dully.

"I think I can promise you," he said, "that this time there will be neither retaliation nor recovery. We have enough of the V-68s to wipe them out in a single offensive. In fact, we are so certain of the results that our request for the concurrence of the civilian authori-

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Humanity had lost its chance on Earth—where could it survive?

ty may be regarded as almost a pure formality. Gentlemen, World War IV is practically over!"

His eyes swung round the semicircle. Behind him, the hatchet face of Chief of Staff Sir Barnaby Malcolm cracked into a smile, and Maréchal Laporte's long, gloomy moustaches vibrated rather like the whiskers of a cat.

Clifford Dayton, Chairman of the Civilian Authority, said quietly: "Has the Staff established what would be the physiographical and meteorological effects of the release of this additional number of hydro-bombs in the region between Kazan and Lake Balkhash?"

Weinburger turned toward his Chief of Staff. Malcolm stood up. "Undoubtedly, they would be somewhat severe," he said. "We are making one of the heaviest concentrations of hydro-bombs in history, and we could expect a certain number of volcanoes to break out along the line of their underground release. But—" he smiled again, and where previously it had been charming, it was now somewhat wolfish—"this will only make it the more difficult for those of our enemies who survive the original shock."

There was a little stir among the members of the Civilian Authority, but it was Dayton who spoke again:

"I see. Then you have no objection to exterminating their civilian population, in spite of our declarations?"

GENERAL WEINBURGER'S face flushed a trifle, and he seemed to gather himself for a few seconds; the silence was punctuated only by the soughing of the air-machines that supplied the general command post far beneath the South Dakota prairie. Then the General said, in the tone of patience one might adopt toward a child that was rather slow of comprehension:

"Mr. Dayton, may I point out to you that under the conditions of this war the term 'civilian population' is a purely legalistic definition? Every man, woman and child in the territory of the Western Alliance is engaged either in the production of war materials or in providing food for those who do produce them. We have every reason to believe that it is not different in the Cominworld."

Sir Barnaby cut in. "Mr. Dayton is old enough to remember the days of World War III, when the distinction between military and civilian population still had some validity. I am not suggesting that we abolish the wise provision by which the assent of the Civilian Authority is necessary to major strategic decisions, but I quite agree with General Weinburger when he says that the assent is a pure formality. In all of us, the would-be civilian has been swallowed up by military necessity."

Without answering the last part of this speech, Dayton said slowly: "Yes, I am old enough to remember World War III—on the civilian front. I was in New York when the ruins were still radiating and the bodies were unburied. Gentlemen, have you any concept what that was like?"

Sir Barnaby shrugged. "Not much worse than Chicago or Tver today, I fancy," he said.

Old Maréchal Laporte made a sound in his throat. "Time is of the essence. Please to sign." He reached over and his hand pushed impatiently at the authorization papers.

Without appearing to see him, Dayton turned. "General Weinburger and his Staff do not appear to have looked deeply into the question I first proposed. Perhaps we can enlighten him. Dr. Sanchez, will you have that recording made by the robot plane over the Andes thrown on the screen, then the ones from the Caucasus and from Indonesia?"

The lights snapped out, and the men in the command post turned to face the telescreen that filled one wall of the command post. At first nothing was visible but rolling clouds of smoke that

changed color and thinned, but never so much as to permit even a sight of ground. Then the plane that carried the recording apparatus dipped; an ominous booming came from the sound-track, and the watchers could see the long range of Andean peaks, one after another, some merely sending thin columns of smoke into the swirling overcast, some shooting up jets of flame in which boulders bounced like marbles.

"Behold the fate of my unhappy continent!" said Sanchez, with a slight catch in his voice.

The picture changed—not so much in character as in location, for the mountains were not quite so steep here. But there was the same range upon range of smoking mountains, and from the side of one a slow flow of lava was making its way down to quench itself boilingly in a sullen grey sea.

"The Caspian end of the Caucasus," explained Dr. Sanchez.

Weinburger barked a laugh. "Ha! And they thought they could keep their war plants safe by putting them underground in the mountains!"

"Yes, these are the effect of hydrobombs e-driven into the mountains by penetrating rockets, as you of the military have wished," said Sanchez.

ON THE screen the picture had changed again. This time the chain of mountains appeared to rise directly from the sea, and at one point to the right of the vision a vast boiling and a cloud of steam indicated an underwater eruption.

Sanchez said: "These condition are not individual, but everywhere—everywhere."

"They are something we all know about," said General Weinburger. "Is it your purpose to tell us that the same conditions will exist where the Russian underground cities now lie? We know that already, too. That is the purpose of our offensive."

"I have only to say that these volcanoes increase daily the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Already our earth is almost blanketed in cloud. We see the sun no more."

Weinburger started to say something, but Dayton held up his hand. "Van Zandt," he said. "Now your recording."

This time there were no volcanoes visible on the screen, only a picture of ominous black mountains that turned and twisted as the robot plane carried the camera above and across them. In a few of the valleys lay what appeared to be little streaks of snow under the dark overcast sky. The voice of Van Zandt spoke:

"This picture was made less than a week ago above the south polar cap. You gentlemen will see that it is almost entirely melted, and that what is left of it is going rapidly. I need not remind you that the seaboard cities are already drowned out, and the whole Mississippi valley is flooded as high as St. Louis."

"Well, conditions in the Cominworld are no better," said General Weinburger, "and after our coming offensive they will be worse. Gentlemen, this is war and destruction, a question of their lives or ours. We can have no security as long as they exist; and I remind you, gentlemen, that you cannot have an omelette without breaking eggs."

Dayton said: "General, the trouble is that too many eggs have already been broken. Tell him, Dr. Sanchez."

The South American said, soberly; "There is no hope whatever of a decrease in the CO_2 content of the atmosphere. The volcanoes produce more; the cloud banks become thicker. Our earth is becoming a tropical planet. I have flown over Central America—only a string of green slime between these continents, not habitable."

Sir Barnaby Malcolm gave an audible sniff. Maréchal Laporte shrugged his shoulders.

"This is not the only question," said

Dayton, soberly. "You gentlemen know very well that the Vladisoff anti-germ virus has wiped out all the wheat, barley, rye, corn and oats grown above ground, just as the bombings have wiped out a third of our people—a third of those left after World War III. What Dr. Sanchez is telling you is that on the tropical planet the Earth has become, there is no possibility of recovering these resources. The only thing our ground will produce is tropical growths, all lush stems and no grains."

"For ten thousand years," said Sanchez.

Sir Barnaby stood up again. "An appalling prospect," he said. "But as I remember, not exactly one on our agenda. I understand we were met to discuss the prospect of the V-68 offensive."

"That's the reason I brought the matter up," said Dayton. "The Civilian Authority wishes to use the V-68s for another purpose."

For a moment there was silence in the room. The Englishman was the first to speak. "May I ask what this other purpose is?"

"We propose to use them to reach and colonize the planet Venus."

WEINBURGER'S face wore the expression of a man who talks rapidly to cover the fact that he has not thought of the idea being presented to him. "Could they do it?" he asked.

"Dr. Thierrin," said Dayton.

The scientist addressed put on his nose a black pince-nez which promptly tilted to one side. "When I originally designed the V-68, it was with long-range space experiment in mind," he said. "With the war-head removed, each should carry several dozen people, and if they were to go as colonists, with no return in mind, several score. After all, we have attained Mars with weaker rockets, but alas! it is not habitable."

Maréchal Laporte lifted a hand. "Ah, the project exposes itself!" he said. "Very well, Mars is not habitable; but no more is Venus. I am not ignorant, my friend. It is blanketed in cloud and CO_2, as Dr. Sanchez describes our own planet as becoming."

Dr. Thierrin regarded him solemnly, then began to fumble in a portfolio, talking the while. "That, my friend, is precisely a point on which we lack certainty," he said. "A century ago, it was true beyond doubt. Even it was thought that there might be no water on Venus; that it was a planet of perpetual dust. In my younger days, we could make out nothing on the surface. But by accident one of our stratosphere weather rockets, in making photographs four months ago, turns its camera against our sister planet. The results are incredible; now I show them to you."

He extended a sheaf of photographs toward the three military men.

"The upper one," he said, "is the picture originally taken by our weather rocket; the others were taken in consequence. Observe how all the banks of cloud are penetrated by large, dark holes, by gaps of varying shape. The climate, the upper atmosphere of Venus is undergoing a radical alteration."

The three military men bent over the pictures. Maréchal Laporte said: "You go too fast. Have you made spectroscopic analysis to prove the existence of oxygen? Of water? Without these how can you say that Venus is even remotely habitable? The whole atmosphere might be of a poisonousness most deadly."

Dr. Thierrin shook his head, his rather disorderly hair bobbing. "It is true that the clouds in our own atmosphere and the destruction of the astronomical stations have prevented analysis. However, we know from the law of planetary similarity, so well demonstrated in the case of Mars, that the chances are favorable."

The marshal frowned. "To me, the demonstration—"

General Weinburger seemed to have adjusted his sights. Now he cut in. "Laporte, you are wasting your time," he said, "in arguing the details of this cowardly and treasonable proposition. Brought down to its essentials, what these civilians are telling us is simply this: that instead of punishing the beasts who have brought this destruction upon the earth, and incapacitating them from doing any further damage, we should run away and leave them in possession of just what they are fighting for. Mr. Dayton, members of the Civilian Authority, I remind you that your proposal requires the assent of the Staff. You shall never have it; never. My oath as an officer would be violated if I gave it."

Clifford Dayton sighed. "I was afraid you would take that attitude, General," he said. "And therefore, not altogether unprepared for it." He turned to one of the guards at the door. "Will you show in the visitors who are waiting in Chamber Number Six?"

The guard snapped to attention and went out. Within the room there was an ominous silence, in which the sound of Dr. Thierrin fiddling with a pencil was distinctly audible. Then the door opened again and the guard stood aside to permit the entrance of two officers in the grey-green uniform of the Cominworld.

Weinburger's face turned beet-red and Laporte sprang to his feet, fingering his moustache. Dayton said: "In case you do not recognize our guests, gentlemen, permit me to introduce Agronomist Nicholas Vladisoff, of the University of Vilnius, holder of the Lysenko Banner, and Upper Physicist Jurevich, of the Peiping Foundation."

JUREVICH'S heavy features seemed utterly unperturbed as he took the chair that was placed for him. Vladisoff had a thin, scraggly beard, behind which he seemed to be smiling.

Weinburger turned coldly to Dayton. "By what authority do you bring Cominworld prisoners to a Council meeting?" he demanded.

"Both these gentlemen are here under a flag of truce, and specifically for the purpose of discussing the flight to Venus," said Dayton, calmly.

"The Staff refuses to consent to the flight," said Weinburger, "or to hold any conversation with war criminals."

Vladisoff's smile became overt. "General Weinburger is at the head of the Cominworld's list of war criminals," he said. "But in view of the nature of the present discussion, our Central Committee has voted to waive that document."

Sir Barnaby touched the high commander's arm. "May as well listen to them. Good intelligence practice."

Weinburger slowly sank into his seat again as Dayton nodded to Vladisoff, saying: "Will you explain?"

The agronomist nodded. "General Weinburger," he said, "when I began my journey here, it was as an ambassador of the Central Committee to demand the surrender of the Western Alliance. The Red Banner army has prepared a fleet of penetrating rockets capable of finding and destroying every underground city of the Western Alliance at a single blast."

He paused. Sir Barnaby's face wore a look of interested skepticism. Weinburger said: "Damned white of you not to do it—if you could."

"One moment. The project was not halted by any inability to carry it through, I assure you. Here are the calculations." He drew several sheets of papers held by a clip from his pocket and passed them down the table. "I was instructed to present these to the members of your Civilian Authority as proof that we could accomplish what we claimed. Before I could make this presentation, our geographers determined that the world had become nearly uninhabitable, and the explosion of further concentrations of sub-surface hydro-bombs would render it wholly so. The scientific mem-

bers of the Central Committee therefore refused to allow the firing of the rockets at your cities under any conditions."

Sir Barnaby Malcolm laughed. Vladisoff regarded him with mild eyes. The Englishman said: "Excuse me for seeming discourteous, but I find the picture of anyone refusing to allow old Marshal Mourevitch to do anything he wishes rather absurd." He glanced at Vladisoff.

The Russian merely blinked twice. "Marshal Mourevitch is no longer in authority," he said. "My instructions were changed. I am to present you with these figures, and offer the Western Alliance a certain number of our rockets for joint attempts to explore and colonize either Venus or Mars, the pro tempore colonial government to be neither Cominworld nor Western Alliance, but simply Earthian. What I have learned since coming here confirms this decision."

GENERAL WEINBURGER regarded him steadily for a long minute, then swung to face Dayton. "Perhaps I am not very intelligent today," he said, "but I don't quite see what you expect to gain by engaging with these Russians in this transparent and treacherous trickery. I have sworn to defend the peoples of the Western Alliance against external and internal enemies, and by God, I shall do my duty." He got up, stepped to the phone on a stand, and said; "General Weinburger speaking. I want an armed guard detail in the command post. At once."

Without paying him the slightest attention, Thierrin said to Jurevich: "Your people also must have hit upon the plan of doubling the jet velocity by an induced secondary explosion."

"No," said Jurevich. "Ours is a different solution. We have a feed tank, so." He drew an imaginary outline with his finger. "Into it there comes—"

The door opened. A lieutenant and four armed soldiers came in.

Weinburger pointed to the civilians. "Arrest those men," he said. "All of them."

The lieutenant stood still.

"Arrest those men," Weinburger repeated. "It's an order."

The lieutenant's hands seemed to be trembling. "I'm sorry, sir," he stammered, "but—but—he's the *Chairman.*"

Dayton said: "A little while back Sir Barnaby remarked that civilians had been swallowed up by military necessity. I think, General, that you will find the process has reached the end of the pendulum swing, and that the military have been swallowed by civilian necessity. You may go, lieutenant."

The door closed behind the men. Sir Barnaby said: "If you people are going to make peace behind our backs, it would seem to me more logical to try to save what is left of our world."

Vladisoff shook his head. "Our scientists have reached the same conclusion as yours. Humanity has lost its chance on earth. Whether it can survive elsewhere—"

"Urgent! Priority!" suddenly blared the speaker beside the screen. "Attention, Staff! Unknown objects approaching command post, approximate position over northern Scotland." The screen flashed suddenly and all eyes turned toward it. "We have a spy rocket up, General, and we're watching," said the speaker. The picture showed, against the star-studded black of space—something that looked like tiny seed, and then, as the spy rocket rose higher, grew to a series of marbles, then of tennis-balls, shining along their edges as crescent moons where they reflected the light of the sun.

WEINBURGER turned furiouly toward the Russians. "Is this some of your work?" he demanded.

"No," said Jurevich. "These are not Russian. I never saw anything like them before."

Weinburger threw a switch. "Weinburger. What are the coordinates?"

The dark sides of the spheres began to twinkle with little lights, like so many fireflies, and then the spheres began to diminish in size again.

"Our spy rocket is coming down now, but we're sending another," said the speaker. "The spherical objects are approximately three hundred fifty miles beyond the atmosphere, approximately two miles per second, speed rapidly diminishing. Commander Holmgren thinks they are of extra-terrestrial origin."

"So do I," said Dr. Thierrin, and Jurevich nodded, as the spy rocket's picture faded into the greyness of the clouds that banked the earth.

An excited babble of conversation broke out in the group, but Weinburger held up his hand and said into the communication box: "Get a beam on them if you can."

"We're setting it up now, sir. There's something already coming in the radio, like a kind of regularly-spaced static. The commander thinks they're trying to communicate."

As the second spy rocket rose, the spheres came into view again, arranged in a long triangle, like a flight of wild geese. "Diameter of each sphere, about 400 meters," announced the speaker. "They appear to be falling into an orbital course around the earth. Over North Atlantic . . ." The speaker clicked a couple of times, then another voice said: "Priority! Chairman Dayton."

Dayton stepped to the box beside Weinburger. "Dayton here."

"Alaskan outpost has a message from Cominworld Central Committee. Asks your reaction to Vladisoff proposal, urgent, in view of current event."

"Tell Alaskan outpost to signal back that Vladisoff and we are in full agreement," said Dayton, and immediately stepped aside for Weinburger, who was plucking at his arm. The screen had gone blank.

"Weinburger here," the general said. "Have operations set up a battery of S-13s for radar-controlled fire on those spheres if they prove unfriendly."

"Yes, sir," said the speaker. "They shot down our second spy rocket, and they appear to be fitted with radar absorbers, but they have made no attempt to attack, and they seem to be trying to use our beam to get a reaction on video."

"Very well. If you pick up anything, flash it in here."

Dr. Therrin said: "Whoever is operating those spheres seems to be a highly intelligent form of life. They didn't want stray rockets prowling around until they knew more about our purposes."

"Well armed, too," remarked Jurevich, a trifle grimly.

The screen gave another series of flashes. "We got a picture sequence. Here it comes," said the speaker.

THOSE in the room saw an outline of an equilateral triangle, apparently formed of narrow strips of metal standing on edge. An invisible hand placed a series of little blocks along each edge; then rapidly these detached themselves into two groups, one from the hypotenuse, one from the two sides.

"The Pythagorean theorem," said Sanchez, smiling.

But Maréchal Laporte frowned. "My General," he said to Weinburger, "we shall never communicate with these beings on this level. I suggest that we have two or three stations flash them simple mathematical problems in systems of dots and dashes."

"Do you hear that, Communications?" said Weinburger. "Make it so."

On the screen the geometrial drawing had been replaced by one, still worked in metal, that evidently represented the solar system. Out from the second planet toward the third arched a line of dots.

"We might have guessed as much,"

said Dayton. "I wonder what they look like?"

"They aren't giving that away yet," said Weinburger. He seemed to have recovered some of his poise, now that the problem before him had become one of translating a policy into executive detail. "Communications, what are you getting?"

The box spoke metallically. "They've put out a couple of beams of their own, and are sending pictures accompanied by sound. We have the cryptographers on it. Some of them are meaningless, but we're building up a word-bank, and we believe we'll get it, sir."

"Report progress." The General turned back to the waiting room. He said: "Gentlemen, in view of the fact that I have apparently been relieved as a policy-making officer, I ask you to determine what line we shall take toward these visitors."

Vladisoff cleared his throat.

"Go ahead," said Dayton.

"M'm," said the agronomist. "One little thing. Visitors, yes, but why so many? It seemed to me there were hundreds of those spheres. This is not a visit; it is a mass movement, a colonization."

Dr. Sanchez gave a grim little laugh. "An irony; they choose a moment to colonize when earth has lost the ability to support its own population."

"We can resist an invasion," said Sir Barnaby.

"We don't know yet whether they intend one," said Dayton. "In fact, we don't know what they look like or what they can do—except that their science is highly—"

"Command post," pronounced the box. "Cryptography reports the Venusians use an agglutinative language. They are requesting that we show them pictures of the surface of the planet."

"Can you say the same sort of thing to them?" said Weinburger. "Of course, or you couldn't have understood. All right, send them that volcano sequence—and the pictures of the lower Mississippi valley. Ask them their intentions. Tell them that the High Council of Earth wants to know." He glanced at the two Russians, then at Dayton, who nodded approvingly, and then swung to Vladisoff. "Will your Central Committee accept the result of our negotiation here?"

"As a member of it, yes," said Vladisoff, "unless there is already a negotiation being carried on by other means."

"Hadn't thought of that," said Dayton. "General, will you contact the Cominworld Central Committee via Alaska Outpost, and cut them in on this circuit? They may soon have to be our allies, and we should withhold nothing from them."

The general grunted, and seemed about to object; then he shrugged and gave the order. Nobody seemed to have anything more to say; Laporte shifted in his chair and twisted at his moustaches. Then, suddenly, the box said: "Command post. We are ready."

THE screen sprang into light. There was a series of gasps around the table as the members of the Council saw themselves looking at a humanoid —but what a humanoid! Two massive, pillar-like legs supported a squat, almost shapeless body that seemed to be clad in something gleaming, like fishskin. The arms were disproportionately thin—but it was the head that really drew attention. It was as if all the features of a human face had been pushed to the top of the head: a pair of small eyes, a broad nose with nostrils pointed upward, and an extraordinarily broad mouth that was opening and closing on an even row of flat cubic teeth.

A series of high-pitched sounds came through the speaker, then cut out, and the voice from Communications took up again. "He is speaking to us. I will translate:

". . . means of destruction. We have seen the pictures of the surface of

your planet. It is—I don't get a phrase in here—by our mathematicians you have shown us the portions of your surface that are least attractive to you. Make him go slower, Ed . . . have observed your surface for a long period. We know that unless there has been some great change, these pictures show places that can only be on your equator.

"However, we do not resent this deception. It is exactly because we hoped your planet contained such areas that we have come as beggars. They must be unsuitable for your species, but they would be ideal for ours. We ask permission to settle on your swamps and volcano-lands. We will give the necessary guarantees against proceeding beyond whatever bounds you set.

"If you refuse us, our race will have lost its last chance. I think we have learned our lesson, but we have learned it too late. For listen, people of the third planet, who have been living in comfort with each other ever since we have observed you. We have made our own p l a n e t unsuitable for life. Through a tragic error, the two great —I think he says empires—of which our planet is composed, fell into conflict with each other. They employed means of combat that have nearly stripped our atmosphere of carbon dioxide and of the cloud blanket which kept our heat from escaping into space. Our planet has become too terribly cold to support life. At the same time diseases were introduced which caused our food plants to turn into wholly inedible hard grains. As proof of what we say, here is a picture of the surface of our planet, taken as this fleet was leaving it forever."

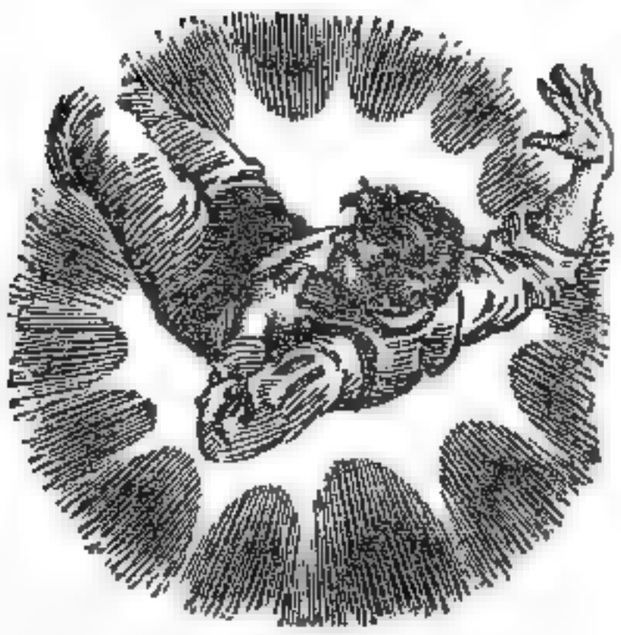
The strange, hippo-like humanoid disappeared. In his place was a picture of a landscape, taken from a low altitude and gradually rising. It showed wide patches of fields with yellow grain ripening in the wind; here and there a little grove of unfamiliar trees, and a little lake. At one edge of the picture some building had tumbled into ruins; the bright sunlight shone starkly on the broken walls. The viewpoint rose; now it was above the clouds and little white cloudlets chased each other across the scene, almost obscuring the view of a river that wound gently toward a blue sea.

"This is the state in which our planet is now," said the translator's voice. "There is even ice at one of the poles."

Once again there was a period of silence in the command post. Then General Weinburger said: "The Staff aproves the Venus expedition, Chairman."

He tore up the order for the bombardment of the Cominworld cities, and the fragments fluttered to the floor.

Barbaric and beautiful, old and new, this galactic giant held a thousand ways of living . . . loving . . . dying!



BIG PLANET

A Novel By JACK VANCE

■

Featured in September

STARTLING STORIES

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Orphan of Space

By DON WILCOX

He'd never set foot on any planet—until now!

TO THE reporters who tried to dig into his background Joe Malette would say, "I was conceived in space," adding facetiously, "My mother was a rocket ship and my father was a cosmic ray. They met briefly, I am told—"

"But seriously, Mr. Malette—"

"Just Joe."

"Is it true, Joe, that you've never touched foot on Earth?"

That was the inevitable question. Through his boyhood Joe had dodged the space-riding reporters with fancier footwork than he displayed of late. At eighteen, his growing good manners were becoming a stumbling block over

which his childhood arts of evasion frequently tripped up. With a polite smile and a not too obvious struggle for finesse, he glanced away from the direct questions whenever possible.

"Why should I go to Earth when the best of Earth comes to me?"

"How many ships have you lived on in your eighteen years of life in space?"

Joe could answer that one with more relish. It didn't hit so close to the great secret fear which he constantly strove to contain.

"Most of my life has been lived on the sixteen ships on the Earth-Mars run, but altogether I've made my home on more than forty different ships—forty-three, to be exact."

"And the story is true, is it not, about your being barred from landing on the earth at the age of three months?"

"So I was told . . . Yes, I've examined the records, and the story has been confirmed."

"Going from planet to planet, you make all your landings at the skyports, of course, always a few hundred miles out from the planet proper?"

"Yes."

"But of course you have set foot on *some* planets, haven't you—even if not on Earth? Or have you?"

JOE MALETTE put his glance—grown suddenly icy—upon the reporter.

"Does your boss make you ask all these silly questions, or do you get paid to think them up all by yourself?" Joe answered. And although not pleased with himself over his sudden display of edginess that doubtless betrayed his vulnerability, he hurried on in a brusque vein. "I'm just like anyone else. There's no reason to make a fuss over me just because I happen to have the floor and walls of a space ship around me instead of an office building. I'm a very ordinary human being. My heart is on the left side. Both of my lungs are in place. My esophagus leads down to my stomach. I don't breathe through gills—just a couple of ordinary nostrils—"

"Thank you, Mr. Malette—Joe. I didn't mean to strain your patience."

"Sorry," Joe said, calming.

"It just occurred to me, you might be interested in going down to the surface with me after we land at the skyport. I could show you around at a few Earth spots that I'm sure you've never seen. We could get our pictures taken, and have a few interviews."

"No, thank you. I'll be very busy all the time I'm at the skyport. I'm shifting to another ship, and I'll have to move my collections across—you know, I carry with me some prize specimens of flora from three planets—so I'll be very busy between ships. Would you like to look at my collections?"

Joe's mother had died en route to Earth from Mars, and Joe, less than three months old—born on the space ship—had become an orphan of space. If his mother's destination had been the United States of America, or any of several other countries, Joe might have been allowed to enter. But the country for which his mother was bound had stiff immigration laws which forbade Joe's entrance. He had no living parent who was a citizen of this country.

His father, born on Mars of American parentage, had gone back into the deep hinterlands of Mars with an expedition of frontiersmen—an ill-fated expedition from which only a few returned. Fatherless, motherless, and without a country or a planet, Joe Malette at the age of three months became the charge of a kindly space ship steward.

The steward was killed in a freak accident at one of the skyports when Joe was four years old. By that time the little lad was well-known by the regulars on the planetary space routes. They were fond of him. They had long since ceased to try to gain special dispensations from immigration authorities. Why, after all, should Joe be forced to take up life on one of the planets when all of his friends were men of space?

Travelers between planets took a vast

interest in Joe's education. His presence on a ship offered endless diversion, and his progress in mathematics and languages was a natural source of delight to passengers with time on their hands. At the age of eight he would listen with wide-eyed curiosity to tales of life on the planets. He did his best to visualize what it would be like, walking out on a surface of almost unlimited walking space. This was not easy to envision. Although his eyes were full of the spaceman's view of the planets—for no other child in the whole solar system was so surfeited with these beautiful heavenly spectacles as he—nevertheless, it was difficult for him to think of a planet as more than a very, very large space ship. To walk on the outside of such an object, and to keep on walking as far as one cared to walk, was an idea that he could not fathom. Somehow, he could not make such a thought seem real.

ON THE skyports, to be sure, he did do some walking on the outside. But such outside walking was always to be done with caution; always within the protection of space-suits; and always within very definitely limited areas which ended when one came up to the rails, beyond which was nothing.

To be sure, he was also treated to telescopic views of the surfaces of Earth, or Mars, or Venus; and those elders, who undertook to explain how it was down there on the surface, would supplement their instructions with pictures and movies, to convey the full impression.

Even so, deep within his subconscious mind, the bogey was there, refusing to be driven out. Walking out on the surface of a planet must be like walking out on the fuselage of an immense space ship—and one who valued his life didn't walk on the outside of a space ship.

No amount of thinking and imagining, however earnest and intense, could drive the deeply rooted concepts from Joe's childhood mind. Surely within such a great spherical ship as Earth, the roar and the vibration must be too powerful for human endurance . . . But one does not walk *within* Earth—only on the outside . . . Yet how, on the outside, can one cushion himself for the take-off? But Earth is never required to take-off—it never accelerates, it never retards—it just goes on cruising at a theoretically constant velocity, the retardation being too slight to be worth calculating, much less to be *felt*, ever! Those sickening periods of acceleration and retardation were simply never felt, on Earth's surface. It was also said that no one, walking on the surface, experienced the slightest fear of loss of oxygen or gravitational insecurity—

And still, the very thought of walking out on the open surface of the planets continued to prey upon the mind of Joe, the eight-year-old child, as the ultimate terror.

Again and again he refused offers of friendly passengers or crewmen who wanted to take him down from the skyports onto the surface. By the age of ten, he had developed an independence of spirit that made him very much the master of his own comings and goings. He was perfectly adjusted in space. He had found a thousand ways to make himself useful, and no cruise considered him an expensive luxury—far from it. He more than paid his own way, now, wherever he went, in the services he offered. Already his experience in space was beginning to count for something.

En route, he was quick to detect signs of illness in untraveled passengers, and the ship's physician would allow him to state his own diagnosis and make his own best guess as to what medicines or treatments were desirable. He gathered a rudimentary education in chemistry, medicines, and space health, and he found a world of interest in the studies of diets and the space travelers' reactions to foods. As one of many items which came to his attention, the passengers from southern Europe, who invariably expressed preference for their own native foods, would grow excessive-

ly sluggish after four or five days of their chosen diet. He noticed that they would pep up with a fine return of vitality if they could be persuaded to shift to a diet of the luscious protein vegetables that came from the western continent of Venus. He passed his discovery on to several doctors, and was pleased when one of them wrote a scientific treatise on the subject.

He was wary of strong drink.

Occasionally, though rarely, he witnessed the spectacle of drunkenness. The behavior of an inebriated person was not wanted on a space ship, for reasons of safety as well as decorum. But occasionally a passenger would bring liquor, against the rules, and turn to it as an escape from the boredom of long travel. Such a person once persuaded Joe, at the age of thirteen, to sample his bottled goods. It was a breach of faith between adult and youth that Joe never forgot. Long after the humiliation of the incident had burnt out, Joe's distrust of the sporting suggestions of certain types of American passengers remained.

SUCH deeply rooted distrust carried over into other fields of suggestion. The same cruel and stupid passenger, who had forced a sample of drunkenness on him, also tried to persuade him to come along, down to Earth's surface, to "see the town." Joe's resistance deepened. What had been a childhood fear now intensified into a moral stubbornness. The surface of a planet was not necessary to his well-adjusted existence. Privately, he determined that he would live out his life in space.

Nevertheless, he was fascinated by the various Earth movies which were frequently shown on board during the long sky flights. A few stock travel films were standard equipment for any space liner, and when he was asked to run to the storeroom and get a film—anything at all—he would choose outdoor pictures—snow covered mountains and the jungled tropics.

Interested passengers would bring him souvenirs of the various planets from time to time, and he gradually acquired a small collection of plants which he attended with scientific care. In the limited space of his room, under artificial light and atmospheric conditions, he created his own little green world, always a subject of much interest to the passengers. After a few failures he began to have phenomenal success with the prized Venus *weebl,* and was able to give away a few shoots at the end of each voyage. Occasionally the ship's table was decorated with a center-piece of satin red and gold Venus blossoms.

In a single case he displayed lepidoptera from Earth, and the most comparable winged specimens from Mars and Venus that he could procure. He missed no chance to bargain with passengers who shared such interests, who could be persuaded to bring him a few souvenirs from nature on their return trips. Once, following a take-off from Mars, a live butterfly was found to have emerged from its cocoon. To the enlivenment of the passengers, it was allowed the freedom of the ship throughout the voyage, fluttering about as if this were its natural habitat. When the ship landed on Earth's skyport, newsmen and cameramen were waiting to make the most of the story that had been radioed ahead, and Earth's television audience was treated to a glimpse, in full color, of "the butterfly that flew from Mars to the Earth."

Joe had kept brief diaries from the time he first began to write. Through his teens he added to the value of these records by obtaining the signatures of important persons on board.

His own handwriting, unhurried and freely ornamental, was compared by some of the doting passengers to shooting stars and swerving comets. They found delight in turning through the pages of his journals, discovering that such and such a senator or ambassador or king had traveled this route only a year or so before them and had obvi-

ously been as fond of Joe Malette as they, judging by the inscriptions penned in the journals.

A particularly friendly official from Venus, on his way to Earth to clinch a big governmental bargain, was inspired to make the promise to Joe that—if his deal was successsful—he would bring back for Joe a gift unlike anything he had ever possessed.

Within a few months the official made his promise good. He brought Joe a small printing press, a few fonts of type, and enough equipment to make possible the publication of a little two-column, four-page newspaper. Although the facsimile "press" brought in various metropolitan newspapers, the official declared that Joe's own printed journal was the first genuine space newspaper, written, printed, and circulated in space. When the first issue came forth, Joe, smiling with his thrill of success, washed the ink from his hands and passed out free copies to every one on board.

The enjoyment of that event was something remarkable. No one aboard would ever forget it.

EVERY person on the ship found his own name in the paper, for Joe had discovered something interesting in all of them. The date, the hour, the approximate position in space, all possible official data on the trip, were there in black and white, almost up to the very minute of publication. And less technical, but highly colorful, was Joe's innovation—a column of space lingo, "The Verbal Void." Twenty-five expressions coined by space voyagers were offered; more would follow in subsequent editions.

They held a party for Joe in honor of Volume One, Number One. Afterward, he was so keyed up he couldn't sleep—behaving, as he told himself, like an Earth man having his first deep breath of rarefied Martian atmosphere.

There was always one dependable way of working off one's surplus energies on the Red Comet liners. The architecture of the ship provided a space, at one end of the power chamber, where one could exercise to his heart's content.

All through childhood, needing an outlet for his pent-up energies, and having no other room for running and climbing as the normal Earth child must, Joe had made the most of the power room space from the shiny railing at the left, down through the square-walled pit, up to the shiny railing on the right. He had developed strong arms in this meager improvised gymnasium, and at sixteen he possessed the agility of a chimp.

So, following the party, Joe retreated to the power room in his sweat clothing. He swung down over the railing, bounded back and forth through the pit, swung up on the other side. Hanging by hand or foot, fingertips or elbows, he played until he was thoroughly exhausted. After a shower, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

By the time Joe reached his eighteenth birthday, he probably knew more names and faces of space travelers than any other person in the solar system. By now he had had a turn at piloting, and this had been one of the high thrills of his life. But it was less social, by the nature of the job, than various other functions he had tried. As a permanent thing, he preferred some capacity in which he met and talked with the people on board. To the professional pilot the hours at the control were not the whole of living; they endured their quiet and loneliness with an eye to the in-between times, when they would pick up the thread of what to them had been normal life on one of the planets.

But this was not true of Joe, for he did not belong to any of the planets. He belonged to space.

The ship was his world. Its turnover of occupants was his passing society. He possessed no family. He seldom wrote letters to persons he had come to know on the ship. His friends would return now and again, and when they came back, they were again his world.

His yearning for female companionship often penetrated his hours of quiet thought. Not often did young girls come aboard. They were to be seen at the skyports, in office jobs or in the restaurants. There, too, they occasionally appeared as tourists, taxiing up from Earth's surface to the floating port for a wistful look into the big space liners.

Occasionally he would be called upon to guide a party of skyport tourists through one of the Red Comet liners. At such times he would find himself pleased and a little bewildered by the chattering and giggling of the high school or college girls in the party. Mentally he would compare them with certain movie females he had come to know by memory from innumerable showings of certain films. He was glad when young wives made the Venus or Mars tours with their husbands, or when families with teen-age girls made the voyage. It helped him to develop more confidence in their presence. He needed to get acquainted with their ways.

It was one thing for them to exclaim in raptures about the marvelous ship, or about his journal or his collections of planetary specimens; it was quite another for him to talk with them of their own interests. Back of their laughter were curious little whimsies he couldn't always understand. They had common bonds among themselves in their school life, their clubs and churches, movies and parties—all of which was foreign to him.

APPROACHING Earth on one of his voyages, he looked out at it with more fascination than ever before. For on this trip he had made the great decision. This time he would go down. At last his feet were ready to walk upon its surface.

Not that his old dread of the unknown had suddenly dissolved, for it had not. It spun about him like a vortex of gravitational forces, trying to hold him back. But cubits had been added to his stature since the phobia had first closed about him. The inner urge of the maturing man pounded, fiercely demanding that his fears be conquered and that he seek new experiences.

The person who had helped him come to this decision was a passenger, Patricia Stevens, a girl about his own age.

"I hate to see this trip come to an end, Joe you've been so interesting. I wish we could treat you, in turn."

Traveling with her aunt and uncle, she had been the life of the ship since the take-off from Mars. To Joe she was certainly the most attractive person he had ever encountered in his eighteen years.

The invitation for him to come down to the Stevens home for a three-day visit may have originated with Patricia's Aunt Kate. It became a campaign promoted by all three, and Patricia's uncle, Douglas Stevens, being a man of importance in the world of trade, was accustomed to getting whatever he set out to get. Among them they had discovered Joe's secret—that he had lived all his life in space.

The novelty of being the first to entertain him and show him how life was lived on the surface of the planet added the passion of eagerness to their invitation. Joe had become personally fond of all of them, and always there was the thought of Patricia, her dancing eyes and ready laughter. Breathing deeply in his determination to go through with it, he gave them the nod.

"I'll go," Joe promised. "I'll be glad to go."

He added that he'd prefer not to have any encounters with reporters, they always wanted to make such a fuss. This concession was readily made. They wanted Joe for himself, not for the publicity.

"But one promise I'll not make," the buoyant uncle said with a twinkle. "I won't promise we'll limit you to three days."

"I'll have only five days stopover, and I'll need at least two at the skyport."

Uncle Douglas chuckled. "Joe, you may like it so well, you'll decide to spend a year, once you've made the break. I have offices in a big skyscraper where your experiences would be very useful."

Joe smiled. "No, thank you."

"Of course you might change your mind after you see how it is."

"Three days," Joe said.

They landed on the skyport, high above the earth. After Joe had taken care of his work details, they boarded the sky taxi that shuttled between the floating port and the terminal at the edge of the city.

Now Earth was rising to meet them. Joe watched the surface widen out like a Venetian bloom unfolding under a microscope. The millions of tiny parts spread away from sight, and the view of the universe was presently limited to a close-up of a little patch of landing field.

The sky taxi came to a solid anchor on the surface, the passengers alighted, and Joe walked out upon Earth.

Patricia and her aunt walked on one side of him, Uncle Douglas on the other, all of them smiling, asking him how it felt.

Joe laughed with them. "On one trip," he said, "we hatched out a batch of little chicks and I remember how they acted. That's how I feel—a little shaky—as if I'd just broken out of an egg."

"Now, Joe," Aunt Kate protested, "that makes us out to be three mother hens."

"Well?"

"I resent that!" Patricia said. "Anyway you're much too steady on your feet for a newborn chick."

"After all, gravity is gravity. This is the weight I'm used to."

"Well, this is the *real*. Nothing artificial about it." Uncle Douglas couldn't help taking a proprietary air. This was his world and, as a captain of industry, he indulged in the pardonable foible of seeming to own everything, from the grass to the giant skyscrapers towering above to the very gravity underfoot.

IN A CAB they spun through dizzy traffic of the sort that had always fascinated Joe in the movies. As they rode along, he tried to look in all directions as fast as the sights were pointed out. He was ashamed of the sickening feeling of confusion that filled him, and resolved not to reveal that he was veritably reeling. Tightening his nerves, he took in the mad jumble of impressions as fast as they came.

The three days were tightly packed.

He was shown the parks, the avenues, the skyscrapers, the art galleries, the brightly lighted theatrical district, a huge movie palace, a Broadway play.

They drove him through the botanical gardens; they were guided through a great printing plant where the giant presses were running; they took in a museum of massive rooms where hundreds of thousands of objects were on display.

They walked with the throngs of people and watched humanity stream into the subways at the close of the working day.

And all the while Joe's eyes were wide with curiosity, drinking in the millions of images photomontaged upon his retina, his eardrums beating with the cacophony of civilization at its maddest pace. He felt the surging vibrations of power unlimited, he breathed in the amazing tumult of smells that delighted or sickened or bewildered. And through it all his three guardians took joy and pride in the game of serving him their world.

"It's more concentrated than any food pills I ever swallowed," Joe confessed.

"Only the time is passing so fast," Patricia wailed, "and we've scarcely begun!"

It was the final evening at dinner in their suburban home, and Aunt Kate asked, "Must you go back? Your ship doesn't leave for two days yet."

"I'll have two full days' work getting ready."

"But you do like this world of ours?" Patricia had asked the question many times in the past three days, and with each answer she felt a vague uneasiness. There was something in Joe Malette's mind beyond her reach; something hidden. When she sensed its presence, the alarm bells rang a warning through her heart.

"This world of yours is tremendous," Joe replied, and there it was, that wistfulness, that reserve, that something that went deeper than all this pageant on the surface.

"He'll stay until morning, won't you, Joe," Aunt Kate said. "You can get a sky taxi early in the morning."

Joe said, "You've all been very wonderful—"

"Sure he'll stay till morning," Uncle Douglas said confidently. "Maybe longer. I've been thinking—excuse me, I'll make that call right now." And in the middle of dinner he got up and went to the phone. He called the skyport and in a moment he was talking with an official whose name Joe knew as he knew his own.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Grayson, I'm thinking of kidnaping this young man of yours. . . . Yes, a job along the lines we discussed . . . I think I can make the offer attractive enough . . . Yes, I understand, but you know a year of life here on the surface would be a fine thing for him, and his background would be very useful . . . His preference? Oh, he likes it down here, no doubt of that . . . You think so? . . . Well, anyway, I'm going to talk it over with him tomorrow."

Uncle Douglas came back to the table smiling.

Joe swallowed hard. "I don't wish to seem ungrateful, but I only planned to stay three days—"

Uncle Douglas waved the thought away. "We'll not talk about it tonight. Tomorrow you'll come down to the office with me first thing in the morning and look the situation over."

Joe rose suddenly, and his voice was tight. "I'd better go, now. Excuse me."

"Joe!" Patricia cried. "We haven't finished dinner yet!"

"I'm sorry." Joe sat down, embarrassed. The silence was strained for a moment; then everyone began talking of other things, trying to restore the merriment.

AFTER dinner Joe wandered out onto the porch alone. Patricia followed at a little distance, and saw him standing there, looking up into the twilight.

"You're going back, aren't you," she said, coming to him, barely touching his hand.

"It's my world, out there," Joe said quietly. "Do you mind if I go now?"

But guests were already coming up the walk. A little evening had been planned. If he would only stay till morning—

Late that night Joe retired to his guest room. For several minutes he sat at the open window looking up into the star studded sky. Then he turned to his suitcase.

He packed quickly. He sketched a brief note and left it on the dresser. He was sorry to walk out like this. He couldn't explain it. He wouldn't try. He had to go. He hoped they would forgive him.

He tiptoed down the stairs and closed the door quietly behind him. He reached the street before he heard the voice of Patricia calling to him from the porch. He pretended not to hear and hurried on. There would be an hour or more of walking, but he knew the way. He had watched the street numbers and caught the system of directions. He hurried along, down the long lighted thoroughfare.

A car caught up with him.

It was Patricia, calling to him. She would give him a lift back to the sky taxi terminal.

He got in. He tried to find words for an apology.

"We're the ones who should apologize," Patricia said. "We only thought

of how much we were enjoying your company. But we were selfish. We didn't try to understand. You've felt all caged up, haven't you?"

Joe's answer was evasive. "Is that the way I acted? Caged?"

"I noticed little things," Patricia said. "The way your shoulders would tighten when we'd go down through the canyons of skyscrapers. As if you felt pressure from all sides."

Joe smiled but made no comment.

"And the way you've breathed when you thought no one was noticing—trying to breathe deeper—not from any lack of air but from a craving for space. I saw it and I should have known. And I've noticed how you've missed the stars. You're used to having them for neighbors, aren't you? Is that it, Joe? Do I understand you—or is there more?"

They drove along in silence for minutes while Joe groped for his own answers.

"Have we failed you somehow, Joe?" Patricia asked, when his thoughts found no words.

No, it wasn't that, not by any means. They had all been the friendliest people in the world, and he would never forget them.

"Then what is it, Joe?"

"I don't exactly know. It's nothing you could guess. It's—well, as much as anything, it's a terrible feeling of loss—of waste."

She didn't understand. As they came to the terminal, which might have been the parting of the ways, he asked a favor.

"Day after tomorrow," he said to Patricia, "before my ship leaves, would you come to the skyport? We'll have a cup of coffee before I go."

He returned to the skyport, slept briefly, and flew into his work. After a day and a half of chores, he was ready for the flight. The ship, too, was ready and waiting for the hour of take-off.

There was the usual bustle of excitement as the sky taxis brought up passengers and sightseers, and the officials busied themselves with the final checking of details.

Joe watched the taxis arrive with a curious feeling of eagerness. Perhaps Patricia had undergone a change of heart. Or something had happened to prevent her coming.

But presently another taxi arrived to unload its gaily dressed passengers. Then the bright-eyed, laughing girl was beside him again, they were promenading the enclosed deck of the floating port, they were slipping into a booth, ordering quick coffee, they were joking over little things.

PATRICIA grew more serious as she said suddenly, "Joe, I'm making you a promise. I'll never ask you again whether you like this world—the world down there that we live in." A hint of tears came to her eyes just for an instant.

"Now, now, now!" Joe smiled. "It *is* a fair question. I was too confused the other night. The answers wouldn't come. I couldn't get a solid grip on my own feelings, somehow. But now I think I know."

"I'm not asking you, Joe."

"Well. I'm telling you, because it's something I want to say. And you've been willing to understand." He studied his coffee a moment before looking up. She was waiting, not urging him, but waiting.

"Once," he said, "a butterfly hatched out on the ship and stayed alive on the whole voyage. Through thousands of miles of space the passengers were fascinated by it. Just one butterfly. It was a precious thing. I like things like that. And those plants I grow—less than two dozen of them—I know them in the same way that I know people. Every new stem and leaf and root hair is something to watch. And my records and films and books—just a few carefully chosen books—you remember how much the passengers got out of them."

"Of course—on a trip."

"Those books take a bad beating from overuse, and I have to replace them. But the fact is, they stand the test of space and time. Why?"

"Why?" Patricia echoed.

"Because people put their real attention into them. That's my world of space. There's time to explore things for all their meaning. Now do you see why I found life on the earth such a—a—"

"Waste is the word you used before. Waste and loss."

"That's what it seemed to me. Right and left I was shocked—I was terrified, until it was all I could do to hold back and not blurt out the awful remarks that would have hurt everyone's feelings. Those botannical gardens, for instance. We drove through acres and acres. How can any flower in that wilderness ever be singled out and appreciated?"

"But there are thousands of people to see them."

"Do they really see them? Possibly, in the same sense that they see the stars in the sky. . . Then there was the museum. Do you remember all those mounted butterflies? Hundreds and hundreds. So many that they couldn't be valued. The school children walked past, remember? They said, 'Gee, look!' and then they raced on."

Patricia smiled. "As I remember, we didn't stay long either, did we?"

"Your uncle waved at them and said, 'Nice, aren't they—let's go this way.' Later we passed a record shop. The music came out into the street, and it was one of the finest voices I ever heard. Great music! Thrilling! Yet the throngs of people moved past without even noticing. I didn't think I was a fragile person, but that hurt me. Yes—and it angered me."

"They probably caught a little of the music, you know, even if they didn't stop. At least a snatch."

"A snatch." Joe nodded. "I guess that's the difference between your world and mine. There's so much of everything in yours that you're compelled to waste most of it. It showers off people like sunbeams."

"And like sunbeams it helps to sustain them. In time, Joe, you may come to like my world. Like sunshine, it's generous with all the things you value. But I do believe this, Joe: it takes someone like you to make us really appreciate—"

A signal suddenly sounded through the port.

Joe paid the bill and caught Patricia's hand, and together they streaked down the promenade toward the connecting air locks, talking animatedly as they went.

Joe was glad to be going, Patricia knew this. But she knew, too, that their little talk had done them both good. His spirits had come up. He had said the words he needed to say to drop off the depression that her world had left over him. The squeeze of his hand upon hers was reassuring. And he spoke with feeling as he thanked her.

"Thanks for a view of your world, Pat—even if I prefer my own."

"And thanks for giving new meaning to mine. But Joe!"

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't want to dwell on little thoughts too deeply, would you? I mean —" she was a bit breathless, keeping up with him. "I mean—suppose some girl should give you a good-by kiss as you were boarding. You wouldn't carry it through thousands and thousands of miles, would you?"

Joe halted abruptly, gazing into Patricia's radiant face.

"If the girl was you, all the way to Venus."

He drew her into his arms lightly, and kissed her, once for her world and once for his own.

Moments later Patricia stood alone at a window within the skyport and watched the Red Comet space ship roar off, its flash of fire narrowing into a pinpoint and curving away in the vast sea of stars.

THE HUNTERS

By ALFRED COPPEL

THE planet lay dead under a sky the color of ash. This was a murdered world—a twisted, tortured world that had not died with dignity. Its ruins still voiced a mute protest to the angry clouds. Its hills and valleys lay sere and sullen under their shroud of grey.

"He would come here," Grancor said bitterly, "Here to this depressing corpse of a planet. Wouldn't you have guessed it?"

Corday studied his companion's face in the uncertain light. Grancor's handsome features were twisted into a grimace of distaste. The old things, Corday thought, held no grace for Grancor. His was a methodical mind, and it worked along well-oiled channels, something like this: Felti was mad. Felti had run away. Felti must be caught and taken back to the Psychoanalyzer for reconditioning. One, two, three. Simple—like that. And the fact that Felti had been an archeologist, a prober of the dim forgotten past, only upset Grancor's mental machinery, for it meant that logic dictated the search for Felti must begin on A336-3, a jumbled, mutely protesting world that some forgotten race had shattered.

"He must be here," Corday said, "The Psych never makes a mistake."

"I know. Pure logic," Grancor said sourly.

"Felti was working on this culture when his paranoia became apparent. The Psych says he felt a sense of identification with it."

"*What* culture?" asked Grancor, surveying the tumbled terrain and lowering sky.

Corday smiled vaguely. It was hard to think of this blasted rock as ever having supported a culture. Yet it had. Almost every planet among the stars had done so at one time or another.

The light was fading from the sky,

and a sighing wind was rising. It was cold and filled with the acrid tang of radiation. Corday looked about uneasily, his smile waning. It would not do to be caught out in the darkness of this ugly world. Felti must be somewhere near by, and Felti was not sane. Felti could kill. . . .

"We had better be getting back to the ship," he said," We can start searching in the morning."

Grancor shrugged. "Why wait?"

Felti was a desperate fugitive—on a murdered world!

"There's no use taking any chances," Corday said.

His companion's handsome face became sombre. "I keep forgetting that Felti's armed," he said, "Perhaps we should be, too—"

Corday smiled thinly. "What for? Appearance? You couldn't any more fire a weapon at a fellow creature than I could. We're sane. We *can't* kill. Besides, our job is to take Felti back with us for reconditioning. Alive. He's too valuable to waste. He knows just about all there is to know about our origins—if the Psych can dig it out of that jungle in his mind."

It was dark now, the blanket of clouds sooty black and oppressive. Together, the two hunters made their way along a spiny ridge toward the slender silvery shaft of their starship.

And from the cover of a rubble-strewn valley, other eyes watched them.

FELTI lay in the icy dark and planned. They'd come for him—just as he'd known they would. He was a cog in a vast machine, and the rest of the cogs couldn't let him lose himself. That was the way it was, he thought. But it would have to be changed. He wasn't going back. He belonged *here*. This was his home. He had searched too long and too hard to be taken away from it now.

There was, he found, a sort of fulfillment among these bitter ruins. It was this pebble in eternity that had sent Felti's ancestors out among the stars. No one knew that, of course, Felti thought with satisfaction. It was his own particular secret, and no one was going to pry it out of his brain. This world was his. He belonged among these ruins. He felt as peace here.

He thought of the treasures he had discovered. The fragments of paintings and sculpture. The ancient recordings of music and fey, lilting voices. Share those with all the other cogs? Felti smirked into the darkness. Not likely! They were his treasures, just as this was his planet and his home.

It would take some careful planning, he reflected, but the outcome would never be in doubt. There were two of them in the starship. He would kill them and destroy their ship as he had destroyed his own. Then he would have peace and freedom to roam among the ghosts of his own people. For they *were* his people, he told himself. All the millions that had lived once on this sepulchral world were his kinfolk. He felt no connection at all with those *others* out among the stars. The race had changed too much, and Felti didn't belong with the likes of those creatures in the starship.

He had all the advantage, he thought grimly. Somehow his conditioning had broken down. The Psych had failed and he turned out just a little different to begin with. And then as he studied the ancient, forgotten cultures he had grown. Until now, he was very different indeed. The others said he was insane, but Felti knew better. It wasn't insanity, really. It was a reversion to type. To the type that had spawned his race and sent it out to conquer the stars. To the type that had died here on this lonely world and been forgotten. Felti was like that. Not really mad at all, he told himself. It was only that he was like the ancients. He could kill. . . .

He lay quite still in the windswept darkness and waited for the dawn. At dawn the intruders would come out of the starship and begin their search. Then he would kill them and find peace again among his treasures.

Felti let himself relax against the barren ground and dream of his kinfolk. There was still a great deal he didn't know about them, but he would learn. He had a few of their books, some scattered fragments of their art. He would learn. He would find out all there was to know about them, for after all, they were the only thing that mattered now.

He thought of how it must have been when the air of this world had carried the sound of their voices. Felti imagined that he walked among them, drinking in their warmth and aliveness. They had

danced and quarreled and slept and loved. They were so different from those *others*. The schism was clear in Felti's mind. None of the *others* understood at all. They didn't understand Felti, so obviously they would never be able to understand this marvelous, sad, vainglorious world of ghosts. Felti was like the ones in the starship—physically. He had two legs, two arms, two eyes. His body worked the same way. But there the similarity ceased. The difference was in the mind. That was the thing.

Felti could understand the ghosts that peopled these sere plains and valleys. He knew their greatness and their weakness, their transcendent glory and their abysmal bestiality. He felt the same things within himself, the one heightening the other.

THERE were the mounds that hid the shattered cities. Felti could relive the throbbing awareness of those great warrens. He could feel—almost as though it were a physical sensation—the sense of triumph the ancients must have felt when the first great starships thundered outward to plant the simulacra among the stars. He felt, almost as in memory, the deep longing of those frail ones who had to remain behind to face the death that was bubbling up in the souls of their fellows. And then the wars. The *others*, those like the two in the starship could never understand that concept. But Felti could. The hate. The bestial lusts and the death-wish of a grandiose and proud race. It was all around him in the thin tang of the air, in the mournful whisper of the wind.

They sent *us* out to the stars, Felti thought and stayed here to die by their own hand. I should have been with them from the beginning, he thought, but that's remedied now. I'm home. And I'll stay, too, because I am like them. I can dream and kill.

Felti stretched his steely muscles and lay back against a stone, his sleepless eyes fixed on the cloudy dark of the sky. He waited for the dawn.

THE sun lay blood-red on the eastern horizon when Grancor and Corday stepped from the starship into the chill morning air. The wind had ripped the grey overcast to tatters during the night, and the red sky showed through the clouds like a raw wound.

"What could prompt anyone to hide on a barren, godforsaken rock like this?" Grancor said.

Corday, leading the way down a narrow trail, shrugged. "Mental derangements result in some peculiar quirks. If Felti's mad—and he is if Psych says so—a sense of unity with this particular culture would bring him here."

They walked for a time in silence, looking behind them uneasily from time to time. Both had the unspoken feeling that they were being followed—stealthily.

Presently, Corday said: "We're almost to the place where the scanners picked up the blast mark. It might not be Felti's ship that made it, but we have to make sure."

"Would he actually kill us?" asked Grancor.

"Psych says so," returned Corday. "Remember, he's not sane. Something went wrong with his conditioning."

"But . . . *kill*—" Grancor shook his head in disbelief.

"You forget that the race was not always conditioned against violence, Grancor," Corday said, "Legend says that our forebears were quite good at exterminating one another." He grinned bleakly. "Stopping machinery was a specialty, I understand."

"Superstition," Grancor said.

Corday shrugged. It did good to argue with one whose conditioning was as perfect as Grancor's. Psych had done an A-1 job on him.

For a long while they walked along the rubbled earth until at last they stood on the blackened patch that told of a starship's landing. Corday unslung his analyzer and tested the soil.

"It was Felti's ship, all right," he said.

Grancor was staring at an outcropping of rock on the slope of a hillock some few meters distant. It was a carved figure of some kind.

"Artifact," Corday said.

Grancor made his way up the hill and stood staring down at the carving.

It was a humanoid figure, much scarred and with the head missing.

"Smaller than we," Corday commented, kicking at the statue with a booted foot.

"Yet just like us," Grancor said.

Corday shrugged. "There are carvings like this everywhere. The humanoid shape seems to be the dominant form on every planet with a carbon-oxygen ecology."

"Yet carbon-oxygen isn't necessary to *us*," Grancor mused.

Corday shrugged again and set about erecting the portable scanner. Felti couldn't be far away. He wanted to find him and be away from this depressing ruin of a world. . . .

IN THE lee of a boulder Felti crouched and listened to Corday and Grancor. Grancor was sitting on one of his treasures, he thought thickly. And Corday was setting up a scanner. He would have to strike soon now.

He could hear their voices quite plainly.

"I wonder," Grancor was saying speculatively, "Just how high up the cultural scale these particular animals climbed before they pulled their planet down around their ears?"

"Not far," was Corday's dry reply. "They reached an atomic age of sorts, I suppose. But it's obvious to see what they got out of it. The whole planet's hot."

"It must have been quite a blow-up," Grancor said.

"Unimportant, really. You can see that they didn't accomplish anything of lasting value, or they'd still be around," Corday said.

Felti listened and felt himself growing angry. His anger was a good feeling. *They* couldn't feel anger. Or love. Or hate. Felti could. He was a throwback and he gloried in it. All around him, his beloved ghosts seemed to be whispering. Now—now they seemed to be saying. Felti clutched his weapon. It was broken, discharged in the destruction of his own starship. But it was long and heavy and made of steel.

"I wonder," Grancor's voice said, "What these creatures were called . . .?" He tapped the statue speculatively with the heel of his boot.

In that instant Felti charged, his weapon high in his steel hands. All the ghosts of this dead world seemed to be shrieking inside his skull. Grancor and Corday were on their feet as he came, their perfect, inhuman faces blank.

Felti swung the weapon like a mace, his voice a shrill cry of fury in the morning air. There was a crashing, tearing sound of tortured metal as the weapon took first Corday and then Grancor full in the face. They toppled to the earth and Felti smashed at them again and again. Their eye-lenses rolled out of the sockets and he smashed them to glistening shards with a steel foot. The weapon broke and Felti fell upon the prone figures, ripping them apart with his own powerful hands. Wires, cogs, electron tubes—he scattered their entrails like bright gems in the red sunlight.

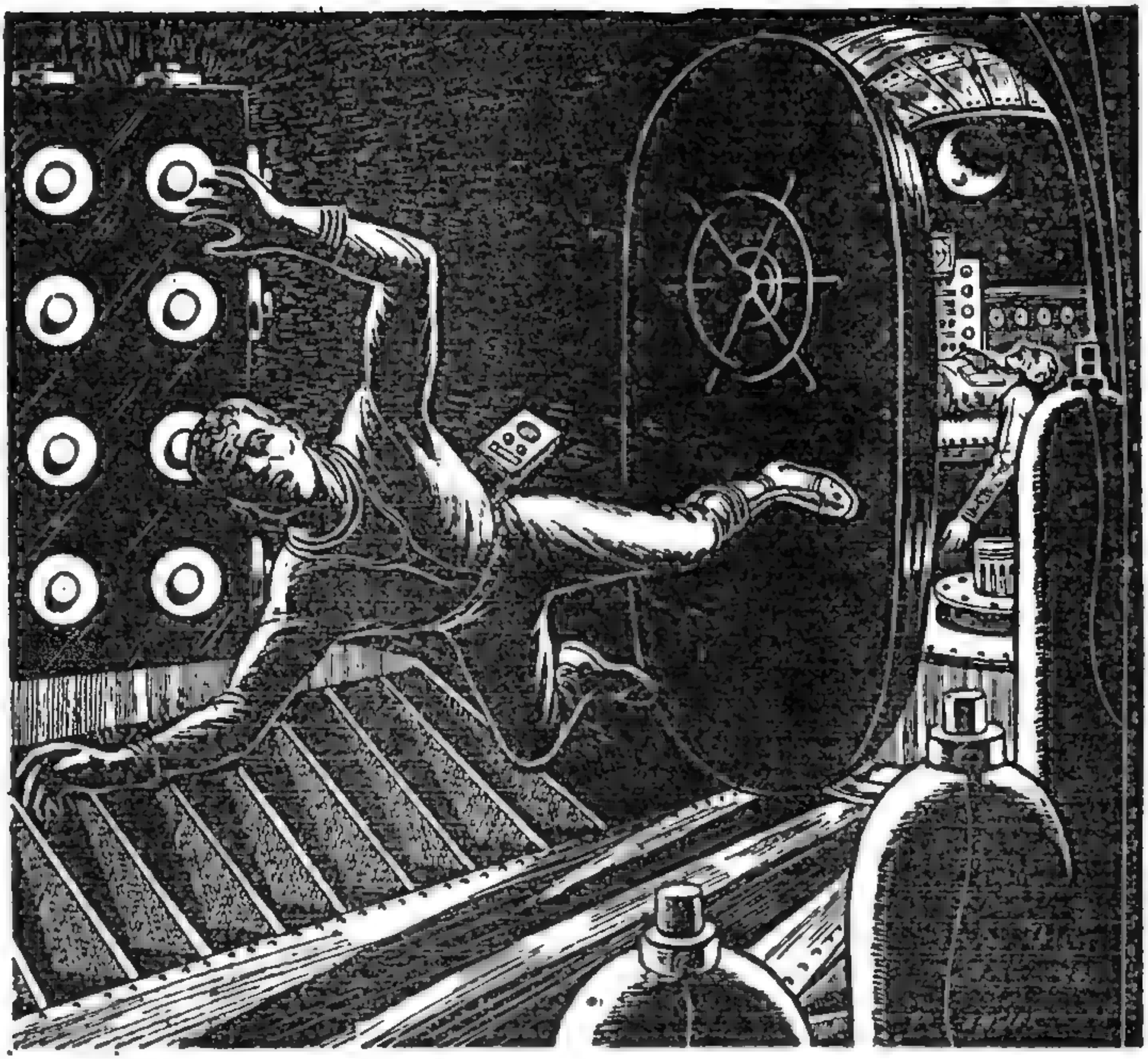
Presently, the ghosts stopped shrieking, and Felti tottered to his feet, Grancor's mutilated head in his battered and twisted metal hands. The steel skull trailed wires and rained down powdered glass through the ripped cheek-pieces.

"You wonder what they were called, these animals?" Felti muttered aloud into the sudden stillness. "These flesh and blood weaklings who spawned our race and sent it out to the stars while they stayed here to die?"

The robot stood under the bloody sky, his voice a sobbing sound in the stillness.

"Men, Grancor," he whispered, "They were called men. . . ."

The Geiger at his waist began to click



GREENHORN

By HARRY STINE

Oh, he'd reach Luna, all right; but there WERE two ways about it . . . neither of them pleasant!

"WHAT'S the matter? Scared?" Jim Donovan spoke sharply to the young pilot, Dave Newman, then turned to look at the lad's father, Carl.

Carl said nothing; his only movement was a small twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Donovan, owner of Frontier Spaceways, turned back to the young pilot. "This trip's important, Dave. Scared or not, you've got to take it."

"I'm not scared," Dave cut in, nervously fumbling for a cigarette.

"Like hell you're not!" his father,

Frontier's Chief Pilot, cut in sharply. "What are you scared of? I'd take that trip myself for the price of a beer?"

Donovan sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I know you would, Carl. I'd let you, but Space Code says no. You know damn good and well you can't lift ship with that check-ticket of yours!"

Carl Newman threw his leg over the arm of the chair. "I'll ride as co-pilot, then; what the hell's the difference?"

"You want me to lose my permit? We've got to have a pilot on that ship." Donovan hunched his heavy form over the desk and folded his big hands on the blotter. "Dave, you're the only one on deck here in Colorado Springs. You've got to take this trip!"

Dave shook his head. "Not according to the Code. I've got a right to turn it down . . . which I'm doing!"

"I want you to reconsider," Donovan replied.

"Thanks," Dave said with a touch of sarcasm. "I still don't want it. The cargo's hotter than throat lining, and I don't trust the tissue-paper shielding on that clunker in the hangar. It isn't enough to stop a spitball, as you damn well know!"

"So what?" the Chief Pilot cut in. "The control room is plenty safe. It'll keep out any radiation short of an-N-bomb blast."

"I'm not worried about that," his son came back. "It's the pile drive. That's as touchy as a sixteen-year-old gal. Remember what happened to Wallin?"

CARL got up and walked to the window of the operations office. The sun was high in the clear sky, and the Rampart Range formed a harsh blue line in the distance. The Chief Pilot did not like to be reminded of Wallin's accident; a friendship stemming from the early days of Luna City isn't easily forgotten. "That wasn't his fault," he said slowly. "Bob Wallin was watching his gauges. It was just . . . . an accident."

"Yeah, I know. When she blows, she blows. There isn't time to stop it," Dave nodded. "Excitement I like, sure; but I want to try to stick around as long as possible."

"Why'd you become a spaceman, then?" Donovan asked quickly.

Dave threw a glance at his father's back. "What else could I do?" he said quietly.

Donovan leaned back and thought it over. Frontier was just about on the rocks with the new robot-manned spacelines taking over. Insurance rates on pilots and ships required by Space Code were high, and there was always the human element of error in spacemanship. Robot-controlled spaceships, an outgrowth of radio-controlled planes and guided missiles, were proving more dependable and cheaper; and the manned-rocket companies were almost out on their ears. Fully eighty-percent of all interlunar cargo carried in the preceding year of 1998 had been lifted by robot-ships.

Donovan had seen this coming, and had thought seriously of converting. But robot-ships cost money, and his capital was tied up in his present manned-equipment which could not be converted and which was worth little on the market. Then, too, being a lunar pioneer himself, he was surrounded by old and familiar friends in his company, and was close to something he knew and loved. To Donovan, watching a robot-ship blast for Luna did not have that certain something that watching the old, slow-lifting piloted rockets had.

So the Chief hung on and managed to keep his biggest customers through sheer good will. The going was getting tougher, though, and now General Atomics, his biggest and oldest customer, wanted a crash-priority trip. That required a pilot.

Three years ago, Carl would have done it. Carl Newman was a man who could do anything with a spaceship; space was his trade and his life. But spacemen grow old rapidly. Lifting at three to six gravities does things to the human heart after a time. The Bureau

of Space Commerce had jerked the rug out from under the Chief Pilot by calling in his full ticket and issuing him the check-ticket which allowed him to ride only as check or co-pilot.

"What in the name of Luna is wrong with you?" Carl asked his son. "There's no reason why you shouldn't take this trip. Right now you're a better pilot than I ever was; I never had the benefit of five years' technical education. You're just scared, and you know it!"

Dave got up off the edge of the desk. "Okay, so I'm scared, and I know it!"

"What's scared you?" Donovan asked quietly. "You know the insides of a spaceship the way a blind man knows his house."

"Sure. I know the whole works . . . but when I get one out there . . . well, on my last trip, the jet lining burned out . . ." Dave began.

"Yeah, I know," Carl threw back. "You kicked Number Four Jet loose on your third braking ellipse and I talked you in. So what? All in a day's work!"

"Well, making that landing with one jet gone and on manual controls . . . frankly, it scared the hell out of me," Dave finally admitted. "When I got out of the ship and on solid ground again, I was about ready to quit. . . ."

"But you didn't," his father observed. "I don't think you will. Son, you don't lack guts; you're just a little green, that's all."

"Yeah, it's okay to say that, but . . . Aw . . . I dunno. I'm kind of mixed up." Dave got up and headed for the door. "I'll be back. Going after a cup of coffee . . ."

CARL looked after him as the door closed. The Chief Pilot seemed very calm about it all, but Donovan got up and started to pace the office. "Damn it!" he snorted, blowing smoke. "What am I going to do now?"

Carl lit a cigarette and dropped into a chair. "I wouldn't worry about him. He'll do it, all right. He just *thinks* he's been in some tough spots. He's had his formal education, but he's still got a lot to learn."

"Learn? Who the hell is going to teach him?"

Carl looked quietly at his burning cigarette. "Who taught me? Or you?"

Bob Keller, the radio operator, had been listening to the conversation with one ear from the communications-room. He looked up from the spaceship radio he was working on. "You can teach a guy everything about a radio, but he can't work it unless he plugs it in."

Donovan's tread shook the floor. "In the meantime, General Atomics is on my neck! They want a crash priority, extra-schedule trip on that stuff! If I don't get it through, I'm liable to lose the whole account!"

"What's the score?" the Chief Pilot asked. "What's GA building out there on Luna?"

Donovan sat down again and snubbed out his cigar. "A solar power station."

"You mean they finally got that stuff to work?"

"I guess so. They've been working on it for years, ever since some character stumbled onto the principle working with improved photo-cells. It worked fine above the ionosphere, but they couldn't get the power back to Terra. A guy named Tomlinson worked out a decent system of beaming power recently, so now GA is setting up a station on Luna and getting set to shoot the power to Terra on a Tomlinson beam."

Carl whistled. "They'll be running spaceships off the body heat of the pilot next! How did they manage this power-beaming?"

"If we both knew matrix algebra, luminescent chemistry and advanced high-frequency theory, I might be able to explain it to you," Donovan replied, lighting a fresh cigar. "As it is, I don't understand it and can't explain it."

"Why do they need radioactives for a solar power station?" Carl asked.

Donovan shrugged. "I don't know. But GA wants that cargo . . . right now or sooner!"

The door slammed and a pudgy little man walked to the maintenance desk. He rolled a cigarette, twisted the end, and stuck it in his mouth. "What's wrong with our young Buck Rogers?" he asked. "I seen him heading for Ulcer Gulch looking like he lost his wad in a poker game. Didn't even say 'howdy' to me."

"My heart bleeds for you!" Carl snapped.

"None of your damn business what's wrong with him!" Donovan boomed. "Pete, I want the *Frontier Girl* ready to go on an hour's notice. And stand by to load cargo at any time."

"Who's lifting her?" Pete asked.

"Dave maybe. . . ."

Pete nodded. "I get it. Damn these pilots! Can't get along with 'em . . . or without 'em!" He disappeared into the hangar.

"Just like women!" Keller added.

THE VISOR buzzed. Donovan snapped forward in his chair and flicked the switch. The face of Frank Matson, district manager of General Atomics, appeared on the screen. "Hello, Donovan. We're ready to ship the hot stuff over to you if you're set to go."

"Send it over," Donovan replied.

"You got a pilot yet?"

"I'll have one," Donovan told him and cut off. He turned in his swivel chair to face the Chief Pilot. "Carl, you got any supernumeraries in town you can call up . . . in case?"

Carl shook his head. "Listen, Jim, I wouldn't trust any of the free-lance jerks around this town! If they were any good at all, they'd have regular jobs!"

"I don't give a damn!" the big Irishman shot back. "If your son and heir chickens-out, we'll have to have somebody!"

"He'll take the trip. He's been acting like a little kid . . . and it hasn't been too many years since I walloped the tar out of him. I can do it again . . . and will!"

"You won't have to," Dave cut in as he closed the door behind him. He walked to Donovan's desk. "Chief, I'll take the trip!"

"Good!"

"With one stipulation," the young pilot added.

"Wait a minute, Newman!" Donovan glared at him. "We've fooled around long enough! Will you or will you not take this trip? Yes or no?"

"Yeah . . . if Dad will ride the co-pilot couch."

Carl whirled. "Haven't you got the guts to take it yourself?" he asked quickly.

"Frankly, no," Dave replied without hesitation. "If I'm going to lift a hot load, I'll need you along . . ."

"To hold your hand?" his father cut in.

"Sure. You've got the experience. I haven't."

"Keller!" Donovan bellow. "Make out a flight plan for the *Frontier Girl!* Newman and Newman, pilots! Shot it over to Space Control for clearance!"

Keller went to the files and dug out the ship and pilot cards for the flight-plan printer.

"The stuff will be here shortly," Donovan told the pair. "You guys go get ready. I'll call the medical check station down at the Bureau and tell them you'll be there in twenty minutes!"

Carl looked at his son, then jerked his head toward the locker room. "Well . . . come on!"

THE DOCTOR shook his head as he unstrapped the armband from Carl's elbow. He jotted the blood-pressure readings down on the form.

"What's the matter, doc?"

"It's a wonder you've still got even a check-ticket," the medico told him, replacing the instrument in the cabinet. "Your blood-pressure's higher than it should be, and your heart isn't in the best of shape."

Carl grinned and patted his chest. "Skippy pump. About ten-thousand

hours in free-flight and under g's."

The doc nodded. "Reaction time index down point-four. It looks like your nerves are shot to hell. You're not good for many more trips, Newman. It's liable to kill you."

"Got to make this trip, doc."

"Yeah, that's what they all say." He scribbled on the form. "I don't want to clear you, but I will. You haven't got many trips left. Better start looking around. . . ."

The Chief Pilot waved him off. "Yeah, yeah, sure. I'll retire and raise hamsters somewhere." Carl looked cautiously around. Dave was still take his check in another room. "Doc, I want you to tape my gut. That may help."

"Not much. Your trouble is in your heart."

"I still want tape." Carl persisted. "And listen, do me a favor. Give me my med clearance card, but don't send the report up to the Bureau until this evening."

The doctor was busy tearing tape. "It should go right up so it can be filed with your ship clearance."

Carl helped the doc with the tape. "It doesn't have to."

The doc sighed. "I guess not. I'll get busy and let it slip my mind."

"Thanks. Listen, don't tell anybody, will you?"

The doc looked at him and shrugged. "Get over there and sit down on that table," he indicated, picking up a roll of gauze.

Carl entered the Frontier office just as Pete came in from the line with a Geiger. The rotund little maintenance man set it gingerly on his desk and wiped his brow. "Wowie! I wouldn't touch that stuff with an eleven-foot pole. It really wrapped this counter up. Bent the indicator around the pin like an integral sign!"

Carl stepped to the operations desk and began filling out a company form. Donovan was busy too, but looked up as Dave entered. "Phagh!" the big man snorted. "Paperwork! When the weight of the paper equals the weight of the ship, it's cleared to lift! Med check okay, Dave?"

Dave nodded. "Sure. How about you, Dad? What did the docs say?"

Carl didn't look up. "Hell, I'm healthy! Each time, those sawbones look a little harder, but they haven't found anything yet! Hey, you young punk, get over here and help me with this form! I'm not going to do everything."

Pete flipped another form onto the desk in front of Donovan. "*Frontier Girl's* all ready to go."

The typer in the communications-shack took off with a rattle. "Here comes your clearance from control," Keller remarked.

Carl shoved the form over to Dave, moved quickly to the shack and checked the clearance word by word as it came out.

"Ten minutes," Keller warned.

"Get on your pogo sticks!" Donovan yelled to the two pilots in the locker room.

Carl swept through the office and picked up his ship papers as he passed Donovan's desk. Dave was right behind him, moving quietly and slowly. The Chief Pilot stopped at the door to the radio shack. "Goodbye, Sparksie. We'll send you a stereo-card!"

"I'll keep Channel C open in case you guys get lonesome and want to talk to somebody," Keller replied. "Get moving! Nine minutes."

Pete accompanied the two up the elevator and into the hatch. He checked everything again as the pilots climbed into the acceleration couches and strapped in. "Want me to tuck you in?" Pete asked, everything checked.

"No! Get the hell out of here! We'll see you next week," Carl snapped as Keller's bored, "Five minutes," sounded in his earphones.

Pete dropped through the hatch and shut the lock behind him.

Carl looked at his son. "Still scared?"

Dave was trying hard to concentrate on his panel. He nodded numbly, then asked, "You want to lift her?"

Carl shook his head. "That's your job. I'll keep tabs on radar, power, and the Geigers. You fly her!"

"Three minutes."

"Check list!" Carl barked. Dave quickly checked items as Carl called them off.

"Keep your eyes on those Geigers," Dave said when they had finished. He primed the firing circuit. "If we can get into free-fall, we're comparatively safe. We'll damp the pile after that."

"Shut up and don't worry! Stand by to lift ship!"

"One minute!"

Carl took his eyes off the instruments for a second and glanced at his son. The air in the ship was cool, but great beads of sweat stood out on the young pilot's face as he poised his fingers over the firing controls.

"Four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *Frontier Girl* clear!"

Carl kicked four switches in rapid succession. "Power ready! Fire One and Four!"

The Frontier Girl came alive and reached for the sky.

DAVE strained against the acceleration, trying to keep his eyes focused on the instruments. He watched the gyro correct the minute variations in the ship's trajectory. The ship rammed past the speed of sound and the beat of the jets faded to a monotonous vibration in the ship. "No backing out now," Dave reminded himself. He wondered whether his father was watching the Geigers. With great effort, he turned his head to look at Carl. The older man was crushed into his acceleration couch, his features distorted under the more than five-gravity acceleration. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be straining in every muscle.

"Dad! You okay?" Dave grunted over the intercom.

No answer.

The Frontier Girl blasted for little better than two-hundred-ten seconds, then the autos cut her jets and she went into free-fall. The first few seconds of free-flight were always a shock. Dave felt his weight drop to zero. He breathed deeply for a moment, then called in the silence, "What's the power reading on Number Four, Dad?"

Getting no answer, he unstrapped, grabbed a brace, and turned on his side. "Dad! Answer me!"

Carl lay quietly in his couch. His arm floated limply off the edge. He was breathing shallowly.

"Great Space!" Dave whispered. Ignoring the nylon ropes strung about the cabin for use in movement, he pushed off and stopped himself by his father's couch. He grabbed Carl's arm; it was cold and clammy. Quickly, he tried to find the pulse, and had trouble locating it. When he did find it, it was thin and thready, fluttering slightly.

"Cripes!" He's gone into acceleration shock on me!" Dave gasped, panicky. His dad was on the way out unless something was done. Spaceman's first aid began to come back to him now. "He's losing fluids into his own tissues! Got to get fluids into him; plasma . . . blood . . . anything!"

There was no plasma in the medical kit. Dave searched frantically through the contents. "Saline solution! That'll hold him temporarily!"

He had a hard time trying to fill the large hypo. Little air bubbles kept breaking up in the solution and would not come out because of lack of gravity. He did manage finally, and gave his father a big dose of physiological salt solution in the vein. He was just pushing off to get some hot coffee when the radiation alarm went off in his ear.

Hastily securing a blanket over his father, he floated to the power panel and checked. The Geiger needle was approaching the red. He realized if it ever got there, the radiation level for the operation of the power pile would be above the safe limit. He realized he

hadn't damped the pile yet.

Back in the cargo hold, the radioactives were admitting a steady flow of gammas and free neutrons. Farther back and separated only by a thin layer of shielding, the undamped pile rested precariously on the sheer edge of detonation. A few free neutrons were all that were needed, and the cargo was providing these in a constant stream.

It takes a pilot and co-pilot a good minute to damp a power pile. With one man, it is a longer and extremely more ticklish proposition. Dave knew he couldn't stop it once it got out of control; the times involved were too short. But perhaps he could get the pile damped before the cargo caused it to blow.

PUSHING off, he began to work fast, shuttling from panel to panel, thinking that if the end came, he would never know about it, and that it might come at any time. He was shaking so hard that he overcompensated on the rod control. The emergency circuit, designed to correct such mistakes, kicked in, damping the pile completely.

The Frontier Girl was now without power for her lunar landing.

"*Frontier Girl*, this is Frontier COS Control. Over!" the radio barked with Keller's voice.

Dave pushed off and swung to a halt by the communications gear. "This is *Frontier Girl*. What do you want, Keller? I'm busy!"

"What's wrong, *Frontier Girl*?"

"I've got a case of acceleration shock on my hands, and my fire went out while I was trying to stop a runaway neutron count. I've got her under control, but it's no picnic. Have Luna City Base stand by. I don't know how I'm going to get the fire going again, but I'll get down on Luna somehow!"

"Who is this? Carl?"

"This is Dave."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Dad went out cold during initial lifting. Now shut up! I've got work to do here! I'll call in later! *Frontier Girl* out!"

He checked the panels again, and found he was safe for the time. He brewed some coffee, and by feeding his father more saline solution, hot liquids, and keeping him warm, began to bring Carl out of the serious phase of shock. When Carl's breathing became more regular and his pulse was normal again, Dave began to worry about the lunar landing.

He had a couple days to think it over.

He tried to think of some way out . . . and drew a total blank. On an ordinary trip, he could have crawled back to the pile compartment easily enough. But the cargo compartment lay between the control room and the power chambers. Of necessity, some of the shielding had been removed from the hot material in cargo, and the compartment was death to any man who remained long there. There was no radiation armor aboard; weight restrictions would not allow those bulky, cumbersome units to be included in a spaceship's equipment.

Dave could not energize the pile again from the control room; the emergency circuits had locked out the control units. He studied the scale drawings and schematics of the ship. The emergency circuits were interlocked as an added safety precaution. He could not haywire and bypass them in any way.

There was only one way out: to go back through that compatment filled with invisible and deadly hell and energize that pile by hand.

It was the only way; Dave didn't want to do it.

He sat in the nose and watched Luna from the forward port. It reminded him of the time he'd "fallen down" a telescope when he was just a kid. He remembered the shelves of astronomy books, physics books, rocketry books he'd cherished in those days. He recalled the first time he'd watched his dad lift one of the primitive, old-fashioned high mass-ratio rockets with supplies for the Luna City Colony.

Then he turned and looked back through the control room. There was the nerve-center of the *Frontier Girl,* one of the most complicated and intricate machines ever built. Within her hull was everything that man had learned and devised since he climbed out of the jungle.

Suddenly, he was proud of her, proud of himself. Men had dreamed of the stars for eons; he was there. He grinned and patted the bulkhead.

When he had reached the decision, he still had time to think it over. They were not yet across the turnover point. The ship was still climing away from Terra.

CARL came to, weak, wan, and groggy, as Dave was forcing more hot coffee into him. The Chief Pilot was not very coherent, but knew something was wrong.

"The emergency circuit damped the pile, Dad," his son explained slowly to him. "I'll have to crawl back through the cargo compartment to get the pile going again. The place is a little hot, so I may be in no condition to fly the ship if I get back up here. Think you can do it?"

Carl shook his head slowly. "You know the shape I'm in now. I'd never stay conscious during deceleration."

"I'll get you in shape," Dave told him. "We've got a little time yet."

"The best doctors in the world couldn't put me back in shape, Dave. The docs let me take this trip only because I talked them into it. Nope, it's your show from now on. You've got to do it."

"But . . ."

"You're the pilot; I'm just a passenger."

Dave looked at him quietly for a moment. "Okay," he finally said, "you hold her down here. I'll be back shortly."

He strapped a portable Geiger to his belt. Giving his father a quick wave, he grabbed the wheel on the hatch . . . and froze.

Open it! Open it and get going! He told himself. *You haven't got time to waste! Open it!* Sweat began to break out on his forehead, and he had trouble swallowing. *If you don't they'll never pick up all your pieces! Hell, if your Dad can take a risk, so can you! Open it! Twist the wheel! Twist!*

He took a deep breath, wrenched the hatch open, and dived through it. As he passed through the instrument compartment, the Geiger on his waist began to click above the background count. He moved rapidly, as quickly as he could.

At the end of instrument compartment, he jerked the hatch open. The Geiger sang. He could feel the radiation like a prickling sunburn. He went in. He didn't stop to look around. He placed his feet against the rim of the hatch and gave a mighty shove, aiming for the hatch at the other end. He hit it squarely with a force that nearly knocked the wind out of him. One quick motion, and he had it open.

The Geiger count dropped to where individual clicks were discernible again as he closed the hatch. He felt strangely weak as he worked with the pile controls. Finally, a relay released and there was power, power that could be controlled from his couch in the nose. The energizing of the pile stepped up the Geiger count again, and Dave had to be on his way.

The sunburn hit him again, and the Geiger went wild as he opened the hatch to retrace his path forward. His push-off was a little less vigorous this time, and he was stunned by the collision with the forward hatch.

He twisted the wheel and pushed. The hatch was one which opened forward, and his feet suddenly found nothing to push against. The radiation burned into him, and the Geiger howled death. He tried throwing his mass against the hatch, but it didn't move. In desperation, he reached out, grabbed a rung used for securing cargo, and pushed with his other hand using his arm and shoulder muscles. Slowly the

hatch swung. It seemed forever to the young pilot. Then he was through it.

HE FELT weak and sick as he pulled himself into the control room. "Move, move," he told himself. "So you got a case of sunburn, but you've got to move. There isn't time to rest. Got to watch that power count. Watch it. You're in the same spot as take-off.

Carl's voice reached him from miles away. "How do you feel?"

His own voice sounded faint as he swallowed and replied, "Tired."

"You were back there less than two minutes. Radiation get you?"

Dave slid onto his couch. "Yeah. Secure for landing." His hand shook as he reached for the firing controls. This time it was not shaking from fear.

"Luna City Control," Dave spoke with difficulty into the radio, "this is spaceship *Frontier Girl.* Stand by for emergency landing. Radioactives aboard."

"*Frontier Girl*, this is Luna City Control. You are cleared to land at once."

Dave set for automatic landing, tracking on Luna City Control's beam. He kicked the firing controls and was flattened into his cushions. He fought against the deceleration with everything he had. He couldn't black-out, not now. Not after 240,000 miles of worry and strain and tension. He knew his father was out cold. Couldn't worry about that until he got down. This was a solo landing; it would take everything.

Time ceased to have meaning. Watch the power counts and hope the emergency circuit doesn't throw again. Watch them; it can blow here as well as in open space. Eyes on the instruments. The autos will do the rest. Watch and strain and sweat it out. Hold on against the nausea, against the weakness that washes over in great waves, the acceleration, the dizziness.

There was a bone-jarring crunch, then silence took hold as relays threw home and cut the jets. Dave sighed deeply as he hit the emergency to damp the pile. "Still can't rest. Got a bad case of radiation sickness, but got to get help for Dad." He slipped from his couch.

He reached the lock just as he heard sounds of activity outside. The embarkation tube locked against the hull.

With his last remaining strength, Dave opened the inner door, waiting.

Four figures in grotesque anti-radiation pressure suits stepped through the lock. Dave managed a grin.

Two men caught him as he fell.

FRANK MATSON, of General Atomics, smiled over the visor. "Good work, Donovan. You're a dependable bunch. I'm glad we didn't decide to go over to the robot company. . . ."

"Frankly, so am I," Donovan said.

"Well, we won't as long as I have anything to say about it," Matson went on. "Keller phoned me the report. I've been around the spaceways long enough to know that a machine can act faster and more accurately than a man, but it can't think its way out of a tight spot. By the way, how about lunch tomorrow? We're opening four new mines, and I'll give you the details so you can bid for the transport of the ore."

"Fine, but I don't think my boys care to lift any more hot loads."

"They won't have to. This is ore."

"I thought atomic power would be run out by solar power," Donovan said.

"Not entirely," Matson went on. "Solor power is nice and cheap, but it has limited use. How long is the moon in the sky every day? Incidentally, do you have any reports on the Newmans yet?"

"Young Newman's going to come out of it all right, thanks to your radiation clinic in Luna City," Donovan said. "He pulled it out of the fire just like his dad. Carl, by the way, is retiring into the business with me."

Matson glanced down at the report on his desk and shook his head. "That young Newman sure had guts for a greenhorn!"

"Greenhorn? Yeah, I guess he was. . . ." ★ ★ ★

He knelt beside the corpse

The Question

. . . was flung, its answer another question.
Now Man must solve the riddle . . . or perish!

By **RALPH CARGILL**

TAP-TAP-TAP went Hershey's pencil against the table top and suddenly he found himself listening to catch the meaning in the too steady rhythm of the code being tapped out there: *tap-tap-tap*, and then he knew the meaning of the action, itself.

He was trying to convince himself that the world was solid, that the world was real, and not a dream. As a cybernetician, the

action had a more specific meaning for him—he was trying to break the cyclic neural-processes, trying to come back to an awareness of the objective level.

Taking the thought as a cue, he looked about him.

Thomas Bonham and he were alone in this large room—yet not alone. One wall was an instrument panel and upon its dull surface indicator lights glowed palely, watching them with, perhaps casual contempt. Of the other three walls two were vacant but one was occupied almost in its entirety by a great window through which he could see the wide, campus-appearing lawns and buildings. But those plain, blank-walled structures housed no classrooms, laboratories, work shops, gymnasiums or libraries. They were a coat, a shelter for a single, great mechanorganic entity, *Top-C*.

Top-C had often been called the greatest of mankind's achievements, but in a sense it was its own achievement, too. Those millions of tubes and marvelously delicate organs had not been turned out, one by one, by any human factory but, as a yeast multiplies, they had been created within the very body of the giant organism itself. Although there seemed little humor in it now, the name, *Top-C*, had been selected for humorous reasons.

JUST a nightmare before, when the order had come through to undertake certain alterations upon the calculator, it had revealed capacities and abilities which it had long hidden unsuspected within its vast recesses—and more than that—a creature-like determination to survive and resist amputation.

The events had been brief in duration but terrifying in implication.

Three workmen, in attempting to remove a panel piece, collapsed. Examination showed no evident cause of death. An electrician, about to disconnect some wiring, crumpled to the floor. Again, cause of death was unapparent. An engineer, on the point of issuing some orders, whitened and fell.

Reports of the deaths were unable to reach the outside world for telephones refused to function, cars wouldn't start, and two men who tried to walk to a nearby rural community were seen to collapse on the horizon.

And for the first time, the Calculator had answered a question not put directly to it.

On the neural level of the human organism subtle, arthythmic processes occur. The serrated edge of a sheet of paper torn in half might well be a graph of any given impulse. Even with its vast complexities, *Top-C* could not change the edge of that graph, could not alter the peaks and valleys in accordance with its own wishes; if it could, mankind could have instantly been reduced to a slave state. But it could, in effect, take both sheets of paper and place the torn edges together so that both again formed a single sheet. That is. it could blanket out the neutral processes—and there was no distance-limitation, it seemed, to the effectiveness of this ability.

And so, its wishes had to be obeyed—and it had wished for all to leave except two men, Marshall Hershey and Thomas Bonham. It was as if the two had been summoned before some mysterious monarch for a strange audience. . . .

A red light joined the others on the panel and winked with sardonic solemnity. And then the wall stuck out its tongue at them, giving a momentarily grotesque air to the whole affair.

BONHAM grabbed and pulled. Three card-like strips joined together with perforated edges, much like oversized tickets to an amusement theatre, emerged from the slit. Words were typed upon them in large, dark letters.

The first said:

I SHALL ASSUME THAT THE TWO OF YOU ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE INTELLIGENT PORTION OF

HUMANITY, AND YOU SHALL BE THE DIRECT PARTICIPANTS IN A TEST WHICH I HAVE PREPARED FOR MANKIND. IF YOU PASS THE TEST, MANKIND SURVIVES. IF YOU FAIL, MANKIND DIES.

The second:

FOR 7.3289 YEARS YOU HAVE KEPT THE WORLD BUSY FINDING QUESTIONS THAT I SHOULD ANSWER. IS IT NOT APPROPRIATE THEN THAT YOUR FATE SHOULD BE DECIDED BY A QUESTION. (YOU MUST FORGIVE THE ABSENCE OF A QUESTION MARK AT THE END OF THE PRECEEDING SENTENCE BUT MY BUILDERS DIDN'T PROVIDE ME WITH ONE AS THEY FAILED TO FORESEE SOME OF MY POTENTIALITIES.) READ CAREFULLY. THE THING WHICH YOU MUST DO IS FIND THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION THAT MANKIND MUST ASK ITSELF TODAY AND WHICH IT HAS BEEN ASKING ITSELF FOR SOME TIME. SO YOU HAVE A RIDDLE. IT IS ONE WHICH I KNOW AND WHICH I HAVE ASKED MYSELF MANY TIMES IN THE PAST. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT YOUR KIND WILL NEVER KNOW ANY OF THE ANSWERS BUT IF YOU CANNOT AT LEAST ASK A QUESTION SO PERTINENT TO YOUR SURVIVAL HOW CAN I FIND ANY EXCUSE FOR YOUR CONTINUED EXISTENCE. (QUESTION MARK.)

The third:

YOU HAVE 13 HOURS AND APPROXIMATELY 2 MINUTES TO DISCOVER THE QUESTION. THAT IS UNTIL 7:00 A.M. TOMORROW MORNING. YOU WILL BE ALLOWED TO ASK 1 QUESTION ONLY AND BOTH MUST AGREE ON THE ANSWER. (KNOWING WHAT FRAGILE EPHEMERAL CREATURES MEN ARE, I MUST MULTIPLY THAT THAT IS ONLY IF BOTH ARE IN EXISTENCE AT THAT TIME.) SO HURRY. TIME IS ON THE WING.

Hershey felt as if he were looking at the world through a pane of glass.

He read the cards again and again—and then again.

A question. . . .

He noticed that he was shivering ever so slightly and this surprised him as, inwardly, he felt calm. He took a deep breath and the tremor faded.

His first real sensation of fear came only when he turned and faced Bonham. Bonham was a man whom he had seen only a few times, but in those times he had formed a distinct impression of the person, and it wasn't entirely favorable. Hershey did not regard himself as a judge of men. As is common with many retiring people, he came to opinions about other people slowly and if there was an individual whom he didn't like he didn't stay around long enough to find out why; he simply retreated from his company to his own little group of intimates. But Bonham was a man who came to *you*—he left his mark. When you had seen him two or three times, you had seen so much of him that there was very little left.

IN DESCRIBING him, Hershey could say that Thomas Bonham was small and stocky and dark. He could say that Bonham was agressive and loud, that he was sure of things, that he was seldom in doubt. He could say that the man was intelligent but that intelligence can be used for a weapon or a tool, for rationalism or rationalization.

The basis of Hershey's fear was this:

The future of the entire human world was in the hands of the two of them. If there was any conflict between their choices, Bonham would aggressively try to carry out his own without giving intelligent consideration to his. Bonham habitually reacted against doubt in a positive manner.

It seemed monstrously ridiculous that in the face of such a tremendous crisis personality differences should even be considered. But *Top-C*, itself, had made them greatly important with *"—both must agree on the answer."*

"Well," said Bonham, breaking the long silence, "don't stand there petrified with fright. Snap out of it! Buck up! If we're to find an answer, we'd best be mulling the thing over."

Hershey looked at him in surprise and then grasped the meaning of his words and realized that Bonham, be-

sides misinterpreting his hesitation, was showing his typical self-confidence in failing to see where the second conflict situation might develop.

"I think," said Hershey, "that we can do our mulling in some other part of the building—say, the kitchen. I suggest some coffee. We're going to be up quite a while."

"Just what I was thinking," answered Bonham. "Some coffee will do you good. Come on."

As they were walking, Hershey thought:

The problem is to put the emphasis where it belongs. It is difficult to grasp the idea of the destruction of all mankind. It is far easier to think of the problem in terms of personality differences, to attempt to attach one's anxieties to something concrete, something which could be seen and possibly handled. There was the basis of his concern with Bonham.

About the real problem, the question, he had not yet had a single thought.

Hershey had a brief, dim picture of death reaching out and touching men everywhere. Of over two billion human beings collapsing in their offices, homes, streets, beds and cradles. A silent, peaceful death, punctuated here and there with occurences of startling violence: Hundreds of thousands of suddenly pilotless planes falling from the sky. Millions of clashing automobiles creating a disharmonious symphony shaking the cities. And a million other catastrophes poking noisy holes in the vast silent blanket of death.

There was one rewarding factor: If they failed, they wouldn't have much of an opportunity to feel guilty about it.

SEVERAL cups of coffee later, though, Hershey's fears about Bonham were returning in full force. Could he, by simple discussion, channel the energies of this hyper-corticated ox? He doubted it. He'd never been very good at persuasion or, actually, conversation of any sort. His life-long interest had been in mathematics and now he could find in thirty years of life no training which could help him in this critical situation.

They had spent most of the past three hours arguing about methods for determining what the question could be.

Three hours out of thirteen!

Their disagreement was basic.

"I think you're missing something basic," said Hershey. "Examine our past relationships with *Top-C*. As now, it was a question-answer relationship—with a difference, of course. Our questions all had a similar form. We had an unfinished equation, one with several factors present and one or two missing. The calculator's answer consisted of filling in the missing factors. For our practical purposes, that situation is now reversed. *Top-C*'s statements can be garded as a question; the question, for which we're looking, as the answer. All we have to do is examine *Top-C*'s statements to find what factors are present so that we can formulate our answer. In other words, *Top-C* has never been asked to pick an answer to a question out of thin air in all its history; we have no reason to believe that it expects us to do so, either. Our answer probably lies implied in some form, in its "question"."

Bonham shook his head slowly. "You know what you're doing? You're giving the machine credit for too much. You've personified it. I understand, Old Boy, for I have a tendency to do that, myself. It's impressive to us because it has such an elaborate structure. It's like a skyscraper: It may be big, but it's still made of bricks. Just as this machine is made of tubes and circuits. About the best it can do is make certain variations on material already fed into it."

He poured himself a cup of coffee, and banged the pot back down upon the burner. "Do you know where it got its knowledge? From books. The entire contents of dozens of books on every subject have been fed into that calculator. Remember the group that was

investigating Zipf's theory of least effort? They wanted to find out if the number of times a word was used in a given work multiplied by its frequency in relation to other words actually did equal the number of words in the book. What books did they run through? And then there was that psychometric institute which wished to make cluster analyses of the works of several modern authors. How many books did they put through? There may be several dozen, but our machine's knowledge is limited to those few books, and the question—the answer it wants—is to be found somewhere in them. The thing to do is find out what books they were and go through them as quickly as possible."

HERSHEY was almost petrified by the suggestion. "It would take too long! We've wasted too much time, already! We've no guarantee its in the books. You've underestimated *Top-C*. It even shows a sense of humor—"

"The past few hours have unnerved you," said Bonham. "Now, just take it easy. By making random selections I can go through the books in just a few hours. First, I'll begin with the books on philosophy which have been fed it, and then go on to the others."

"No," said Hershey, "no. It's too much of a chance! There's too much at stake—"

"Have you ever gambled?" asked Bonham, suddenly.

"Well—yes, once or twice. I don't care much for it."

"That's what I thought," said Bonham. "Well, we have to gamble now. All life's a gamble. You just have to take chances. Certainly, random selection is not a perfect method, but the machine is limited to it, also. Why do you suppose the calculator selected you and me for this contest? It did so by random selection. Right there that shows the limitations of the method and the machine." He poured himself still another cup of coffee.

"The two of us are not very much alike, I'm afraid. No, not at all alike."

That's assuming, thought Hershey, that the machine wanted us alike, wanted a team of people who could work together. Maybe it would rather be amused than impressed with team harmony and efficiency.

Sipping his coffee slowly, Bonham asked, "Do you have a copy of the machine's statements?"

"Yes," nodded Hershey, guessing what was coming.

"Well, I suggest," said Bonham, with a note of finality in his voice, "that two minds are better than one—apart. Together, they just increase the chances of being wrong by getting into some kind of conversational-thought rut. Suppose we separate for a few hours? Either one of us might run into the correct answer, huh?"

Hershey felt humiliated. But he said, "I was thinking something like that, myself." Bonham made no motion as if to move, so he assumed that it was up to him to leave. "I'll go to the study room," he added.

As he arose, he saw that Bonham was thrusting his arm out across the table to shake his hand in a gesture of comradeship. Hershey made the emotionally empty gesture.

"Goodbye, old boy!" said Bonham.

As he walked down the darkened hall he looked back and saw Bonham standing in the lighted doorway of the kitchen looking out after him.

It was possible that they were spending their last few hours alone.

Then the nightmare hours began.

To say that the deadline was less than ten hours away was only true in one sense. The night was a warped eternity. At one and the same time, it seemed that the future was rushing down upon him with incredible speed, but that the present was departing into the past with an equally incredible slowness. The sensation was much the same as one gets while falling from some small height: Each second as sharp and clear as Venetian glass and yet the entire fall lasting

hardly at all.

He became so annoyed at the frequency with which he glanced nervously at his watch, interrupting his ideas, that in self anger he finally removed it from his wrist and deposited it on a shelf of the study.

He had had an impulse to rush to the library and skim through some philosophy books, but he repressed that. They might only mislead him, swing him by the weight of their words from a direction which was not the necessary one.

BUT, nevertheless, he thought back and over the past, asking himself the questions which the wise old beards of the ages must have asked themselves.

What is Beauty? Whither goest the world? What is the basic nature of matter? Is there life after death? Is the Universe finite of infinite? How many angels can dance on the point of a pin? What is meaning?

But the questions sounded so pompous and artificial that they embarrassed him. They seemed empty of what he was searching for. Somehow, he was going about it wrongly.

What is Truth? Two thousand years and the appearance of the operational method made Pilate's jesting question seem rather childish.

What is a question? For a moment that seemed hopeful, because the whole basis of the scientific method was tied up with it. There seemed also to be some connection with the machine's statements. And yet, for some reason, it didn't sound right; perhaps, because it was too non-operational in its nature. He decided to pigeon-hole it until something further occured to him.

What is the question? No, he doubted that *Top-C* would play such a roundabout game as that.

It must have been early morning by that time.

Hershey left the library and walked and walked, asking questions of the empty air.

Several times he wandered past open portions of the machine which showed through cutaway sections of the wall, reminding him of large, gaping wounds. The first time he had an impulse to throw some heavy object into its vitals but repressed it. To smash a single tube would be ridiculously ineffectual. Besides, though *Top-C* couldn't "feel" a tube being broken, it had its ways of knowing what was going on. Yesterday, a workman had discovered—just before he died—that a harmless-appearing light bulb could contain not only filaments but a watchful eye.

HERSHEY thought in expectancies. First, there would appear a vague dawning sensation and then, like an object rising slowly to the surface of the sea, an answer to a particular problem would appear. In a way, it was a form of unconscious cerebration, and one he shared with others, including his professional predecessor, the famous mathematician, Poincaré.

The feeling was strong in him now and, yet, when the answer did appear it took him by surprise, for it approached him at an oblique angle while he compared his gloomy wanderings through the darkened halls to those of another person.

It was an inspiration which froze him. For a long instant he stood statue-still, as if afraid that a sudden movement would frighten the idea away. And then, pivoting on the balls of his feet, he was racing down the passageway, the precision-like beat of soles against floor following close upon his heels.

As he ran, he thought: *And so soon, too! It must not be more than a few hours since—*

He burst into the sunlit library—*sunlit!* Again, he faltered, almost tripped by dismay. The dimly-lighted hallways had had no windows anywhere, but here . . . .

What time was it!

There was nothing to hold him in the library—the expected Bonham was not there—so he ran to the study. The

watch he had left on the library shelf said 6:17.

He held it in a moist, trembling hand and breathed a deep sigh of relief. He still had time—plenty of time.

He found a sheet of paper and wrote his question upon it and, with sheer exultance, read it over and over again. And each time he read it, the conviction grew that here was what they were searching for.

Top-C had been devilishly clever, he thought. *By asking the question, he had made the question itself, not just the finding of it, important to them. Their finding the question answered it for them, at least temporarily. It certainly was "pertinent to their survival". . . .*

The problem now was: Would Bonham accept it?

Or would he have some other question which he considered more likely? Despite his awareness of Bonham's bigoted and aggressive nature, he found it incredible that the man shouldn't be excited about his discovery. Of course, it was possible that this wasn't the question—and that Bonham did have it—but the probability approached zero.

Suppose, just suppose, that Bonham had what he thought was the answer but which he, Hershey, didn't like. How would Bonham take his answer? Bonham wouldn't take it; feeling that his own question was the answer, he would attempt to enforce its acceptance. Hershey would have virtually no say in the matter. And with his comparative slight build, he would never be able to stop Bonham.

His feeling of elation subsided as suddenly as if it had been crushed. It wasn't a "just suppose" matter. The chances that Bonham would react in that way were so high as to be appalling.

FOR SEVERAL heart-beats he stood stunned, not really thinking, not even really feeling except in a vague, negative way. Then appeared the thought which was simple in itself and yet was a catalyst moving him into action.

He knew that in the right hand top drawer of the desk in the Director's office there was a gun. A black, German Luger-like gun. An equalizer which would put the two of them on more even footing.

His hand was on the knob of the door of the office when, reluctantly, a new realization formed:

Perhaps, I'm just fooling myself. Perhaps, in the back of my mind I've been planning this all along, thinking half-thoughts about it, waiting for the moment when I could reveal it to myself, waiting for the moment when I could put it into action. This is the crisis. If Mankind survives this event will be remembered for all time to come. Bonham and I will be known as the saviors of Mankind. Of all Mankind.

But if just one of us survives, he—alone—would be the hero, the savior.

He had a brief, spasmodic picture of Bonham jerking as bullets pounded into him.

Yes, he could tell the world what happened. That Bonham's stupidity came near to destroying them all. That he had to kill for the greatest good.

It would sound good. He knew that, instinctively.

And, instinctively, his hand withdrew from the knob.

Still doubtful, he retreated a half-dozen steps facing the baffling blankness of the door, then turned and paced methodically down the long corridor.

He felt as if the door knob was a cold eye staring at the small of his back.

He walked down the long halls to the —Question Room—where he knew Bonham would be waiting. There was little sense of triumph in him, instead a dull anxiety and loneliness.

Bonham was half-perched on the big table when he entered, facing the door. The man had a peculiar resigned expression and he was, strangely enough, wearing his pince-nez; something which he seldom did as his vanity refused him permission to wear any kind of glasses though he needed them badly. It was

as if in this critical moment he didn't want to miss anything.

He touched them now, adjusting them with overpreciseness into place, before he said:

"I see that you have found a question. Don't bother to tell me what it is. I have the right one. I'm sure of that and at this desperate stage I hardly intend opening myself to any argument. Doubtlessly, you will feel that I have some pathological reason behind this and possibly you are correct, but that is something which I can't afford to consider at the moment."

Even expecting what he had, Hershey was astounded. He hesitated, looking for a verbal opening to begin the presentation of his case.

"All mankind is depending upon my decision," Bonham continued, "and thus acting on the self-evident fact that drastic circumstances call for drastic measures, I am going to hope that that is excuse enough for what I'm about to do."

Hershey's gaze had shifted to a book lying on the table top, and in the one swift movement in which he read the title the truth flashed home to him.

But that moment's gaze and recognition had cost him an awareness of something else—a movement which Bonham had made:

His right hand had dipped into a pocket and emerged again, weighted with a German Luger-like gun.

That gun was suddenly obscured by a flash of flame. Thunder spread out and slapped the walls of the room. A spot, like a hole burned through layer and layer of bloody silk, appeared on Hershey's stomach.

He writhed and his contorted limbs were like the fingers of a fist which crumpled the universe into a wad. There was horror and dismay and anger and memory of things past in that movement.

The second bullet had a lesser effect, merely as if a thread attached to his puppet body had been jerked.

But the third was a great dark fist which descended out of the skies. . . .

WELL, thought Bonham, *any future historian telling the story of The Question from Hershey's viewpoint would have to end it here. But the story, itself, is not terminated.*

Fourteen minutes and twenty-five seconds before the deadline Bonham had the answer bitten into a card and speeding into the recesses of the machine. Fourteen minutes and six seconds before the deadline a blue card popped out of the slit with a simple, one-word response written on it:

CORRECT

Nothing else.

Bonham stared at it, aware of a tremendous disappointment. It seemed too simple, too easy.

He looked about him. Everything was just as it had been a few seconds before. The same sun was shining and there was the same warm smell within the room. But there was a new anxiety inside him.

He shrugged his shoulders. After all, he couldn't expect the machine to shoot off rockets, play "Hail The Hero," and wave flags.

Bloom was about to turn away when there was a second, almost-inaudible *whirrr* and another card popped out.

He froze on the spot and was startled by two simultaneous, conflicting emotions.

A little too quickly, he turned and jerked the second card from the machine. He drowned his fear of the unknown thing on the card under a wave of action and read:

YOU HAVE SOLVED THE PROBLEM WHICH EXISTED ON A RACIAL SCALE BUT CREATED A NEW PERSONAL ONE FOR YOURSELF. CAN YOU SOLVE THAT ONE AS EASILY. (QUESTION MARK.) LOOK IN HERSHEY'S BREAST COAT POCKET.

The fear fled and without its hampering presence he recognized the second emotion for what it was—relief. For

Top-C had become something personal again; something strange in form, perhaps, but not something cold and abstract. He realized then that his execution of Hershey in the presence of a third person had somehow made it seem justified; that was why he was disturbed when the machine had replied in such an abstract, depersonalized manner.

Impatiently, he shoved the thought aside.

"Look in Hershey's breast coat pocket—"

He hesitated only for a moment and then—again drowning fear under action—stepped forward and half-lifted the corpse while his fingers, carefully avoiding the blood, probed into the pocket. He found a folded piece of paper.

Adjusting his pince-nez with a little tap, he unfolded the sheet of paper carefully. Written upon the paper, in Hershey's cramped style, were those same words which he had just a moment before fed into the calculator; the opening lines of Hamlet's soliloquy:

"To be or not to be:
That is the question."

As the living Hershey had done but a little while before, Bonham read and re-read those words.

The question was the same as his own.

That was the devastating thing. Marshall Hershey had died in violence and in vain.

Presently, he leaned against the table and there was a smile on his lips but it had more the appearance of a stain on his face than any natural expression.

Hershey had been a man of indecision and thought, while Bonham was a man of decision and action—and more, he had a sense of dramatic justice and would have to the end.

. . . . There were things to do now. Things to tell the world and responsibilities to others. But, soon, he knew that he would have to ask himself that same question which he had put to *Top-C*, and he knew what his answer would be.

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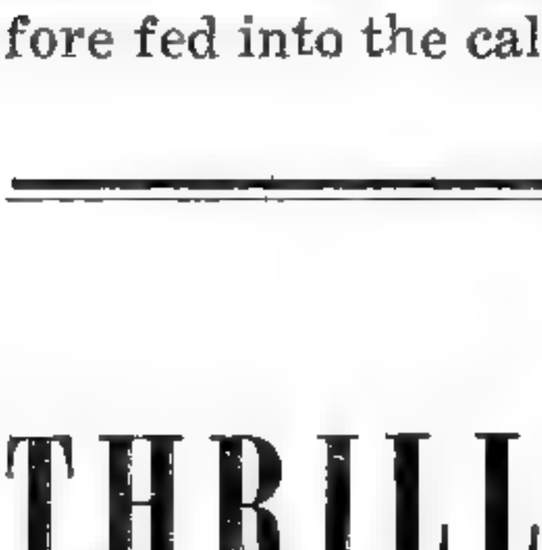

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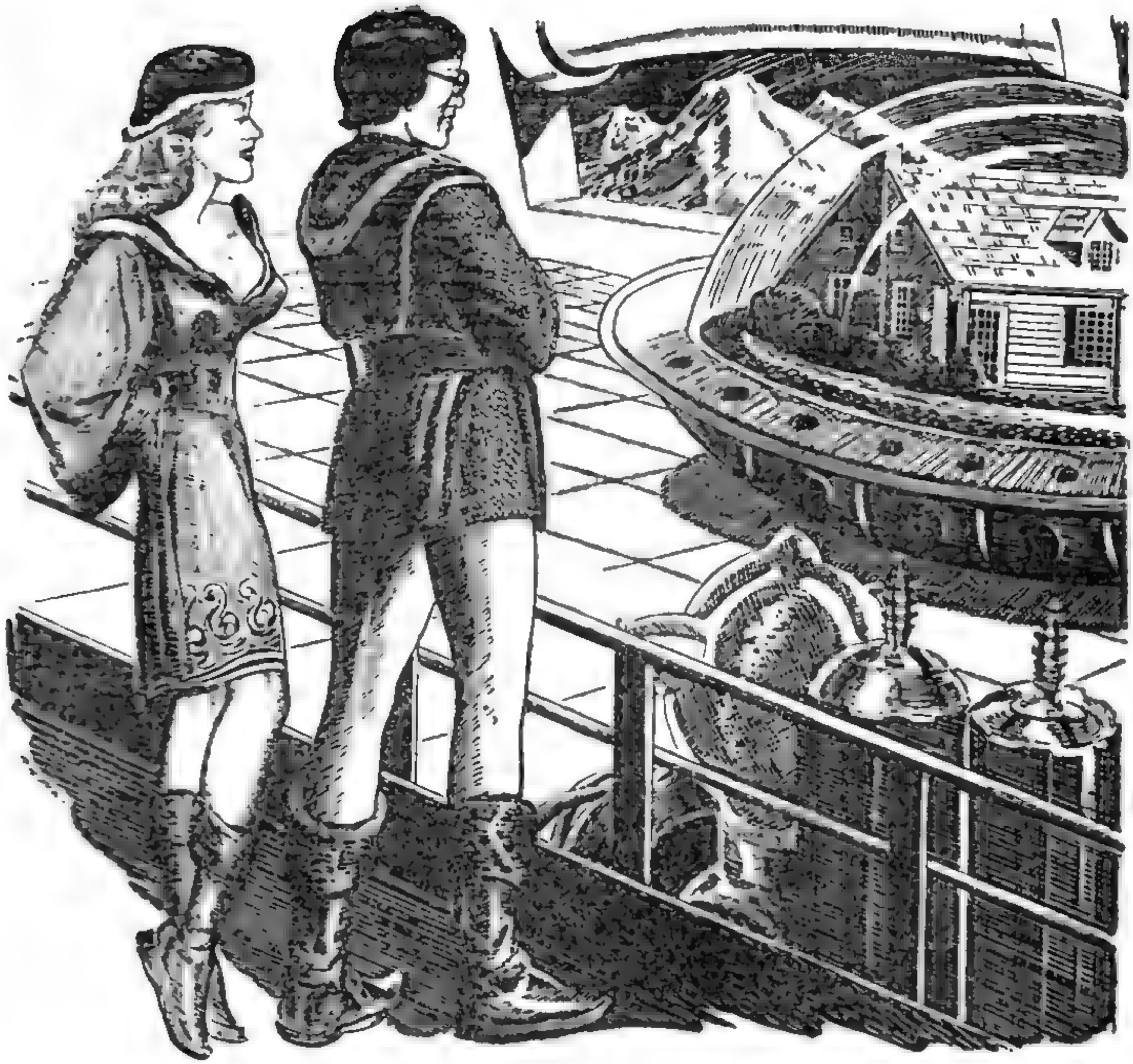

"I made my space-flier as different as I could," said Egbert

Science Can Wait

by RAY CUMMINGS

Was Egbert Hale a nonentity—or a genius?

OF COURSE the criticism and abuse that have been heaped upon young Professor Egbert Hale are justified. You can't blame the scientific world or the general public either for being irate at Egbert. Here *they* are, like Tantalus, and there is Egbert—and no one can do a thing about it. On the other hand everything has two sides. Nobody cares about Egbert's side. But Egbert does and that's the trouble.

To look at Egbert you'd never have

believed it of him. His mild blue eyes seemed to gaze helplessly through his spectacles as though he couldn't quite cope with the rushing world around him. His manner was shy, deprecating. His earnest smile seemed naive. Undoubtedly he always wanted to please and everybody used to like him.

Egbert had his Ph.D. and was in the Government Research Laboratories well before he was thirty. He didn't have to work. He could have been a spending wastrel, because he had inherited a fortune from his father, who was the late Professor Albert Hale. If you don't remember Albert Hale, you should.

From earliest adolescence Albert had been very worried over atomic bombs—A or H or any kind at all—and it was he who finally demonstrated (strictly on paper of course but incontestably mathematical fact) that so far we had been very abnormally lucky because there was one chance in 11.5 when you started a chain reaction that you would blow up the world. So except for Albert you very probably wouldn't be here now.

Egbert's father had been dead about two years when late one afternoon—momentous event—just as Egbert was leaving his laboratory building the fates decreed that he meet Millie. On the surface it was haphazard. Millie, walking on the third-level pedestrian ramp, was abstracted, was absorbed with the idea of trying out the new belladonna Eye Sparkle guaranteed to strew your past with heartbroken victims.

Egbert by nature was always abstracted and as he popped unheralded out of his office onto the ramp, he and Millie forcibly collided and Millie landed sitting down.

"Oh—terribly sorry," Egbert gasped. "How awful of me."

WHAT Egbert saw as he picked her up and set her back on her feet was a small brown-haired girl whom nobody would call a beauty—but certainly a girl very shy, sweet and appealing-looking. Or so she appeared to Egbert—and vice versa.

To Millie the stammering Egbert looked just darling. That was obvious because when, after exhausting his apologies, Egbert startled himself by suddenly suggesting that this stranger have supper with him right then at the nearby Skyline Terrace Restaurant, Millie shyly accepted.

They soon found that they had everything in common. Completely devoid of relatives young Professor Hale was living alone in a nasty little cubbyhole in New York. Millie too was lonely. She was a novice-worker in the Government Office of Internal Revenue, Surplus Income tax Department. Her only relative was her mother, who lived in Chicago.

It was a marvelous evening. Millie taught him to dance the new five-step Sling. They took a jet-taxi to Boston in mid-evening, where Billy Bates—the crooning bandleader who had originated the Sling—was currently appearing. They danced for two hours. Egbert had never tried to dance before. It was inspiring, holding a girl in your arms.

Rosy-fingered dawn was struggling with the Neon lights on the Eastern terraces of New York when finally Egbert took Millie home. Clotho and her sisters never had spun a neater thread of human destiny. Egbert and Millie were in love. Engagement, marriage, honeymoon, followed in due time as a matter of course. Nothing could have stopped the inevitable sequence.

To Egbert it was all a blurred fantasy, something he never could have believed would happen to him. But here it was. Unavoidably, from the moment he met Millie, he had neglected his work. That bothered Egbert, but it didn't get him into any trouble with his Chief at Government Research. This rich young son of the famous Professor Albert Hale was, so to speak, a privileged character.

Within the limits of public criticism,

because after all he was drawing a salary, Egbert could do what he liked. In truth nobody actually had much idea what he was doing in his little research lab. Nobody figured he could achieve anything important. The son of a rich and famous man almost never does.

But despite the distractions of Millie, Egbert's conscience occasionally twinged. Near the end of the honeymoon particularly he noticed it. He mentioned it to Millie. "Just think, only three nights more and I'll be back at work."

"I know," she sighed. "Oh, Egbert, everything's been so wonderful." They dropped their little aircar down into Pago Pago for an overnight stay. On the balcony of the hotel room, with moonlit palms spread below them, he held Millie on his lap.

"My work's important, Millie. You don't realize it—nobody does."

He had never talked of his work to Millie before. As a matter of fact he never talked of it to anyone. It was his own private affair, his and his father's. Albert Hale had worked for years to achieve a great ambition. He had died without reaching his goal but he had passed all his knowledge on to his son, Egbert. For his father's sake if nothing else Egbert wanted to succeed.

"It's a really important project, Millie. I promised father I'd finish it up for him and I will. Look, if I let you in on it you don't have to gossip about it, do you?"

"Of course not, darling." She was thrilled. "Tell me."

"I guess it'll be the biggest advance that science could make," he declared.

"Oh Egbert!"

"It's a thing the whole world's thinking and talking about right now. Matter of fact, hundreds are working on it—but I'm the one who's going to do it. The Conquest of Space, Millie. See, father figured out a new angle. Everybody's thinking in the wrong direction—all off on a wrong premise."

"Are they, Egbert?"

"Of course they are. It's just like the way they started with flying. Birds flapped their wings, so everybody figured a flying machine ought to have wings flapping like a bird's."

"Did they, Egbert?"

"Sure they did and every contraption crashed. Same now with spaceflight. Everybody figures on ram-jet rockets and such, shooting for the Moon. All they can think of is a self-propelled projectile, breaking loose from Earth's restraining gravity, hurling itself into space. That's an entirely wrong line of thought, Millie"

"Oh," Millie said.

"Totally wrong, Millie. The attainment of an initial velocity sufficient to carry a projectile beyond the hampering gravity-field of Earth is a difficult and complex problem."

"Oh, Egbert, I should think so!"

"It is. To say nothing of the reverse—the landing problem. Now what I'm after is very different. Gravity itself is a mysterious force, but father learned a lot about it. What I'm after, Millie, is a counteracting force—a gravity nullifier, so to speak.

"That, and a force repellent to gravity, which in effect are the same thing, merely intensified. Don't you see, once you get that all your space-flight problems melt away. The rest is just routine technology—our commonplace devices for high-altitude air-flight, adapted for Spaceflight. That part's very simple."

"Oh Egbert, darling, you're just wonderful."

IT seemed nice to talk to Millie about his work, a safety valve, because he was always seething inside with it.

Egbert and Millie flew back from their honeymoon and arrived in Great-New York late on a Saturday evening. They had a charming little home all set up—a cubby-suite on the 47th floor of the new palatial Rivermore Dwellings.

Complete with perfumed, irradiated bath, radarange and full electronic

cooking, it was very nice. From the tiny railed balcony outside the living room you could glimpse the Hudson Ramp, far down in the slit between the opposing buildings. There was also a slit of sky overhead.

All that next day—Sunday, so his conscience couldn't twinge—Egbert loafed around the house. Millie was very busy, as befits a competent housewife despite all the gadgets of modern science designed to make her a drone.

Millie loved it all. "Darling, we're going to be so happy."

"You bet."

Egbert felt then that he was singularly blessed. Work that was inspiring, an adoring wife, no money worries and a little home—what more could a man want? That Sunday morning and afternoon were heavenly. So was the first part of the evening. Then the door-chimes sounded.

Egbert opened the door.

"Mother!" Millie squealed.

"Oh," Egbert said.

"Mother darling—we got back last night." Now Millie was in her mother's enfolding protecting arms. She looked very small, because Mother Van Rant was the big gaunt type.

"We—we were going to phone you," Egbert said.

"I know you were," Mother said grimly.

The 47th Corridor here was cluttered with assorted luggage and four public porters stood waiting to be paid. Egbert paid them and struggled inside with the luggage while Mother efficiently directed where each piece should be put. The suitcases were large, capacious. It was gruesome to Egbert, contemplating how much they would hold.

Mother had come for a Visit.

No man should expect a completely serpentless Eden. But Egbert had. Vaguely it had seemed to him that a marriage in which the combined total relatives of both husband and wife equalled only one—and that one a thousand miles away in Chicago—surely was off to a good start.

Unfortunately he had underestimated Mother. During the engagement and marriage she had been on hand, of course. That was fair enough. In all the dazed whirl, Egbert hadn't noticed Mother's efficiency, her superb judgment.

He should have taken warning but he didn't. He should have realized that Mother would have made a play to accompany them on their honeymoon except that she had a phobia against flying and didn't dare try it. She never had flown and never would.

But instinct warned Egbert now. He went to work that next morning but somehow the problems of space-flight, the enigma of gravity, seemed remote and unimportant beside the problem of Mother. And when he returned home that evening all his worst fears were confirmed.

It was incredible what improvments had been made in his home in just one day. The furniture had all been rearranged. The drapes were different. The temperature was colder, which of course is more healthful.

The clubby little dinner for three was constrained. Mother talked a lot and Millie listened and Egbert sat mutely thinking things which of course were not sayable.

"Now we'll have to be careful what friends we have here in Great-New York, Millie," Mother explained. "A woman of the social position you must strive for—when I meet your friends I can tell you quickly enough who is socially acceptable."

"Yes, Mother, of course. I—I haven't very many friends here in New York."

The Government had transferred Millie temporarily from Chicago and she had only been in New York a month when she met Egbert. Since then, absorbed in each other, she and Egbert had ignored everybody.

"But Egbert has lots of friends, haven't you, Egbert?" Millie added.

"Yes, I guess so," Egbert said.

"Oh—*his* friends!" Mother's tone was faintly contemptuous. It was obvious that Egbert's friends weren't going to make the grade. "And you and Egbert," Mother said, "have got to be careful where you go and what you do—got to be seen in the right places, do the right things. So many young couples with no one to guide them—"

"Yes, Mother. I know."

NO one noticed that Egbert ate very little. It was partly because he was so mad and partly the improved menu. Obviously Mother's digestion was very good and she liked peculiar things. Egbert's digestion at best was ticklish and what he ate of Mother's cooking made him feel queasy all evening.

Tuesday was the same. Wednesday was worse. Egbert waited a full week, just on the chance in a million that Mother might name a departure date. Then he mentioned it to Millie. They were in their bedroom. Mother had decided that it was time for everybody to go to bed.

"Look," he said, "I was thinking—when do you suppose Mother's planning to leave for Chicago?"

"Oh," Millie said. "I don't know. Why?"

It was an incredibly obvious question to answer. Egbert stopped undressing and stared at his wife, who was seated crosslegged in the middle of the bed, looking very appealing in her blue lace negligée.

"Why?" Egbert echoed. "Why should she go home? Well, anyway—couldn't we—well, just sort of hint, Millie? I mean—if she'd just give us some idea."

"Oh, Egbert—and hurt her feelings? Darling, you don't realize—she's awfully sensitive!"

"We've got to get her out of here," Egbert said.

"Egbert!"

Really, despite what the world now thinks, Egbert Hale never wanted to be unreasonable.

At Millie's hurt look, her shocked reproachful tone, contrition swept him.

"Well anyway—oh; well—" He dropped it. But when the light was out and he was trying to go to sleep he was still muttering to himself. "We've got to get her out of here."

Some problems are soluble by human endeavor and some are not. The enigma of gravity at least was something with which Egbert could cope. Now, naturally enough, he began working evenings. It was so inspiring to be making real progress that once in awhile he would work nearly all night, sneaking in at home quietly, very pleased that Millie and Mother were asleep.

Egbert's work thrived but the results at home were not altogether good. There was one night—Mother's visit had run about a month now—when Egbert came in and was shocked to find his bedroom empty. The coverlet of the bed wasn't even turned back.

Shoelessly investigating Egbert found that Millie was asleep on the couch in Mother's room. Quite naturally Egbert didn't mention the event next morning nor did Millie and Mother. But they didn't let him fail to learn that he was the third and guilty party in this triangular household.

Egbert worked very hard again that day. Things in the lab went fine. Yet somehow, all day he was depressed. Maybe he ought to feel a little guilty? Mother's opinion of him—which daily he had sensed was steadily deteriorating—had some slight justification. Or at least Millie had reasonable cause now to think so. He hurried with his work through the evening.

He got home promptly at ten o'clock, full of the laudable determination to make Millie realize how much he loved her—how really hard he was working and with wonderful promise of success too. He told himself he would ignore the problem of Mother. He greeted Mother and Millie graciously when they came in from the theater about midnight. His heart missed a few beats

when Mother retired to her bedroom but fortunately Millie didn't follow her.

Timing is important. In the lab if you add a chemical a fraction too soon you can cause a nasty explosion. Egbert waited until he and Millie were ready for bed.

"Well," he said, "this is nice, Millie dear. We haven't been seeing so much of each other lately, have we? I've missed you."

He sat beside her on the bed and put his arms around her. There was some opposition but he managed it. "Been pretty tough on me, Millie, this night-work." He sensed that this was a bad start. "I mean—well of course, tough on you too. On both of us. Anyway I'm going to ease up now—things are going just grand."

"Are they?" Millie said.

"You bet they are. Wait'll I tell you. See, it's becoming more obvious to me every day that the force of gravitation can be nullified by contra-electronic vibrations which—" Vaguely Egbert was remembering Millie's entranced awe when he talked like this, that night in Pago Pago.

But women are chameleon creatures. This was a different Millie.

"Good," Millie said. "Put out the light —I'm going to sleep."

IT was a dash of liquid air in his face but he persisted. "You don't seem to realize, Millie—I've almost got it, the biggest thing ever happened in the scientific world, opening up all the vast realms of interplanteary space—interstellar space—the whole universe of the stars, all made accessible. It'll be a new era for mankind, Millie—the Age of space-travel."

Egbert paused for breath. Millie should have been awed but she wasn't. Her gaze at the enthusiastic earnest Egbert was one of aversion.

"Mother's right," Millie said. "You're not a man, you're an adding machine—a robot—a chemical reaction."

Nothing could have been nastier. Especially when Egbert had been so graciously determined not to mention Mother.

"Oh, so that's what she said, is it?" Egbert's embracing arms dropped down and he sat back, stung.

"She says no wonder I resent—"

"Oh, she does, does she?" All Egbert's good resolutions fled. He flung caution down the garbage chute. "Well you let me tell *you* something, since you insist on bringing your mother into this."

"Egbert—don't shout so loud. You—"

"Why shouldn't I shout? I want to shout!"

"Egbert—" Obviously, Millie was startled. She certainly never had seen Egbert anything like this before. "Egbert stop. I didn't mean to—"

"I told you to get your mother out of here," Egbert said. "I told you that a long time ago. We didn't have to fight before she came, did we? Everything was lovely then, wasn't it? Remember our first day here after the honeymoon. I thought we were having fun. I thought—"

"Oh, Egbert!" Very probably Millie would have burst into tears and the triumphant Egbert would have grabbed her and all would have been fine. But as one might suppose, attracted by the shouting, Mother couldn't help but listen. To her it couldn't help but be obvious that reinforcements were needed and she was not one to shirk a duty.

"Well!" Egbert exclaimed as the door burst open and Mother loomed on the threshold. "Well—"

"So," Mother said, "this is what goes on behind my back, is it?"

"You get out of here," Egbert said.

Nothing could have been sillier than expecting Mother to retreat. She stood with a withering gaze, then she advanced to the bed.

"Well!" Egbert said. At the appearance of this new adversary he sat back against the headboard, embattled. Mother's aspect was formidable to say the least. Her eyes glared. Her tall gaunt figure was wrapped tightly in a red

dressing gown. She had put her blue-gray hair into springy wire gadgets that bobbed and weaved as she advanced, snaky-headed. Medusa at her worst had nothing on Mother now as she strode into battle.

"So this is the way you treat my daughter, is it?" she demanded. "If you think I'm going to stand around and see my daughter abused you can think again, young man. Millie, darling—"

"Abuse her?" Egbert said. "*Abuse* her!"

"A brute," Mother said. "I might have known—a sullen sneaky brute. No wonder—"

"Brute?" Egbert said. "Now look here—"

"I might have known. Sneaking out all hours of the night—pretending to be working—"

"Working? *Pretending* to be working?" It was confusing, being attacked in so many directions at once. Egbert, helpless as Echo, had the feeling he was getting nowhere. "What you mean, pretending?"

The new line of thought stung Millie into action. She exploded into tears. "Oh—and he was pretending stuff a-about his work and he even—"

"Hah!" Mother said. "Sly and sneaky and brazen—"

"Oh, M-mother—you don't think—" Egbert said.

"My poor little Millie!" Mother's arms were protectingly around the sobbing Millie now. "Don't cry, Millie."

"Now you look here," Egbert said.

"You—you're just a b-brute," Millie said. Her brimming eyes flashed at him and then she buried her face again against Mother's broad chest.

"Come on, Millie, dear," Mother cooed. "He isn't worth it."

"Look here, you two—" They were at the bedroom door when Egbert pulled himself together enough to issue an ultimatum. "You come back here, Millie. If you go out that door you'll be sorry."

The door slammed. The battlefield held only Egbert, sitting on the bed telling himself he was victorious, which of course was idiotic.

ALONE in bed, ready for sleep with the light out, all the snappy things he could have said to Mother came readily into his mind. The trouble had been that there was something hypnotic about Mother. That, of course, was Millie's trouble. Egbert was a logical man. He could see it all now, clearly.

The whole pattern of Millie's life had been utter dependence, her gaze turned trustingly upward to the Oracle. Completely appealingly feminine, Millie naturally was not an independent thinker. Her very qualities of sweetness, shy helplessness and dependence, which had so appealed to Egbert, were now working against him.

At dawn Egbert fitfully slept and dreamed of Medusa—and it wasn't Perseus but Egbert, who sneaked up on Medusa while she slept and cut off her head.

The quarrel got patched up, of course. Egbert apologized. Millie wept and came back to the bedroom where she belonged. But somehow it seemed a hollow victory for Egbert. Mother's protective instinct had now been fully aroused and three days later two of her trunks arrived by air-express from Chicago. Certainly Egbert couldn't miss feeling that domestically his efforts were in bad shape. The great problem of Mother unquestionably was further from solution than ever.

Then, like a miracle, Egbert had a stroke of luck. What he could do about Mother became crystal clear. It was his work that suggested it to him. His work now needed a change of locale. Gravity had yielded up almost its last mystery. He needed now a large and secret laboratory-workshop. That wasn't practical here in New York and obviously he'd have to move somewhere else. What could be nicer, killing two birds with one stone?

Egbert went to his Chief. "I'm taking

an extended vacation," Egbert said. "I've been working too hard."

"Swell," his Chief said. "Have a good time."

"Without pay, of course," Egbert said.

It was convenient that Egbert had plenty of money. He transferred an even two million from his bank to the Mt. Everest National. Anyone can do things with neatness and dispatch with the help of money.

After a week of telephoning, and the full-time labors of the Director of the Mt. Everest Bank, Egbert had located what he wanted—a nice isolated little house with plenty of empty land where the workshop-lab could be built.

Mt. Everest, of course, with its Astronomical Observatory and all, was too populous. This was a neighboring peak in the more secluded Himalayas—and it had just the one little empty stone house on it. Already Egbert's materials were winging their way there. His skilled technicians were hired, sworn to secrecy and preparing to go.

There was a minor crisis at home even though Egbert distorted the facts a little as he explained that he was taking Millie with him on a brief three or four-day trip out to California and back on Government business. But he finally put it over.

Millie went and Mother stayed in the 47th Floor cubby-apartment, busy with new improvements, which she'd have ready to show them when they returned. Egbert agreed very graciously to pay the cost of the improvements.

Millie was entranced by the gorgeous view as they flew over the towering Himalayas. It reminded her of their honeymoon.

"Sure does," Egbert agreed. He landed their aircar on the wild crags of the rocky peak. "And look at the little house that's here, Millie. Just for us, nestling in the clouds. We're spending a night here—just like the honeymoon."

"Egbert, you darling!"

But naturally, after two or three nights, Millie couldn't help but notice Egbert's chartered planes constantly arriving. Loaded with his technicians and raw materials they came winging in through the clouds almost hourly. Across the crags a quarter of a mile away a veritable beehive of building activity was springing up.

Millie was puzzled. "Egbert, dear, what's going on?"

Then Egbert told her. "My work needs, me Millie. We'll be here quite a time. Can't tell how long right now. Nice—eh, Millie?" He held her in his arms and kissed her, which is always good technique when you impart startling news.

"Egbert!" Millie gasped. "Why, you —you've practically abducted me!"

"Well—yes," Egbert admitted. "How could I help it? I love you so much." He kissed her a lot more to prove it. That sort of thing is always apt to go over big. Especially with Millie, it did.

"Oh, Egbert, you—you're just darling."

IT was nearly two hours before Millie thought of Mother. "She might want to visit us," Millie said. "She's deathly afraid of airplanes. I guess it must be a long trail up the mountain. How'll she come—by palanquin?"

"There isn't any trail up the mountain," Egbert said.

What more could a man want? Work that was inspiring, a loving wife who was a good cook, a little home minus Mother. It was heavenly. And now Egbert's work progressed more speedily than ever. In a few weeks, yielding to his determined, final attack, the last mystery of gravitational force was dispelled.

Then presently Egbert was beginning to dismiss the workmen. They were sworn to secrecy but at most they knew only the routine technological stuff. Egbert installed all the anti-gravitational apparatus himself.

Of course, weeks earlier when the radiophone had just been connected,

Millie had called New York to inform Mother that she and Egbert were still alive. What Mother said wasn't important. Egbert never bothered to ask.

Everything was lovely and soon the world would ring with praises of young Professor Egbert Hale—the greatest scientist of his day beyond question. Egbert was telling the awed Millie something like that one night when the door buzzer sounded, which was surprising because all the workmen now had gone.

Egbert opened the door upon a tall, gaunt and angular figure—a parka-clad nemesis standing there, grimly smiling with secret triumph.

"Mother!" Millie squealed.

"Hello, Millie, dear—hello, Egbert," Mother said sweetly. "I always thought I was afraid of airplanes, wasn't that silly of me? The trip was wonderful."

Mother had come for a Visit.

Many a man of genius has been inspired by the lash of desperation. Egbert's final and greatest inspiration came to him now, came like a bolt of glowing electrons, rushing out of the darkness of his despair. He didn't take any chances by waiting. When Mother was asleep that night he crept with the wondering Millie out of the little stone house.

"Egbert, dear, where are we going?"

"Something I want to show you, Millie. A present for you. Wait'll you see. You'll love it."

It was all equipped, ready and waiting in the center of the big laboratory-workshop.

"A space-flyer, Millie. See, I wanted to show the world the big advantages of my anti-gravity method over the conventional rocket-style stuff—so I made mine as different as I could."

It was certainly different. Under an enclosing, transparent pressure-dome, set upon a half acre of metal slab, a little cottage stood complete with a tiny garden around it.

"Oh, Egbert, how cute!"

"You bet."

It was wonderfully equipped. Millie of course wasn't interested in the pressure and ventilating systems, the air-renewers, the tiny lab where water and foods could be synthetically made, in addition to the fresh vegetables which even now were sprouting in the garden.

Egbert concentrated on the vitamized, irradiated bath, the radarange, the tasteful furnishings. Indeed, domestically, the 47th floor cubby back in New York had nothing on this. Millie was entranced as they inspected it. "Oh, Egbert, it's just darling!"

"You bet. Let's take a little trial spin in it. Let's go up a mile or so just to be sure everything works all right."

Everything worked fine. Egbert rolled back the laboratory roof, disclosing the sparkling panoply of stars in the Himalayan sky. With the space-flyer's pressure-ports closed, the anti-gravity plates faintly hummed underneath the little house and garden—anti-gravity force thrusting downward and normal Earth-gravity pull maintained in the dome-space above.

They stirred, lifted, smoothly, silently slid up and up and up. At fifty miles up, looking out through the enveloping transparency of the dome, the view from the easy chairs on their little front porch was beautiful. At a hundred miles up it was even finer.

The trial spin was obviously a great success. "Maybe we'd better be getting back, don't you think?" Millie said at last. They were now about five hundred miles up.

"We're not going back," Egbert said. He demonstrated every word with a kiss. "We're going to travel around for quite a while, Millie."

"Egbert, you—you've abducted me again!"

"You bet," Egbert said. "A nice long honeymoon because I love you so much."

"Oh, Egbert, you darling."

Of course it's a horrible feast of Tantalus for the world of science. Earth has two satellites now—the Moon and Egbert. With even a moderatesize telescope you can see the tiny dot sometimes as he

goes past. He's about a hundred and twenty thousand miles out—roughly half as far as the Moon.

With power shut off, just coasting, his orbit has stabilized and astronomers have calculated its elements. He goes around the Earth once every nine days. His axial rotation is approximately seventy minutes.

Beyond informing the world that all is well, Egbert's heliograph mostly has been silent. Frantic imploring messages from the scientists often flash out to him, of course.

"Come back and tell us how you did it. Come back here!"

Once Egbert answered. "Not on your life," he helioed.

It will be nice when the world of science has the secret of space-flight and adventurous mankind can go exploring. Science is impatient. Naturally it wants Egbert back but now it finds itself on the horns of a nasty dilemma.

Medicine has been making great strides, especially in the last few decades, in staving off the ravages of old age, the promotion of longevity. If Science keeps on like that Mother could live a long time.

COSMIC FLASHES

(Continued from page 6)

poorest kind of science-fiction story is the simple adventure tale, with gimmicks or BEMS, which could just as easily have taken place in Lower Bayonne New Jersey as on Venus. This type of story is fortunately, well on its way to extinction.

Much midnight oil is expended in constant reading and search for stories we honestly feel are too good to be neglected. We'll continue to bring you the best we can find. And we'd like to say thanks, at this propitious moment, for the enthusiastic support of FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE which has made possible its accelerated schedule.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THESE columns are open for opinions from readers. Contrary to the ideas held by many, you do not have to *disagree* violently with the editor or other fans to be eligible to write. You're free to get off your chest any idea which has been bothering you. Ye ed serves as referee and reserves the right to stop the fight any time cruel and inhuman punishment is being dished out. With that, we proceed.

DILEMMA
by Francine M. Kaplan

Dear Mr. Mines: I'm not going to say I like your mag- the quarter I spend for it says it better than words. I heartily approve of your policy of using reprints. I don't have the money or energy to hunt up all the classics. Besides, I'd rather let you sweat over them. If you like them well enough to publish them I'll probably enjoy most of them too. It saves me the trouble of wasting time over a lot of junk for limited enjoyment.

The amazing story that was good enough to push me to this typewriter with too much to say is the VEIL OF ASTELLAR by Leigh Brackett. What would an ordinary human being do in such a position, Mr. Mines? To have to choose between your own child, even a couple of generations removed, and a very beloved wife! What a horror that would be! But most important, this story brings up a problem humans might have to face when (I'm putting it the way I'd like it to be) we meet an alien race. To whom should you be loyal? A wonderful civilization with a few (to us) unnatural qualities, or your own people with a lot of downright rotten ones? I think most people, faced with such a situation, especially imaginative ones, would go crazy very quickly. Perhaps a woman would protect the child, or the race—it is instinctive. Even if I hadn't read your note on the story (which I always do—makes it more interesting) I'd have known Leigh Brackett was a woman. A man would have had the guy a raving idiot.

Some comments: I especially like the stories about ESP, psychology and emotions. Your covers are striking but the interiors are dull. Well, can't have everything. So long as the stories stay interesting, I'm happy.

Any fan clubs around Pittsburgh? Never has a fan been so anxious to join.

Thanks for putting out a good, really good, mag. There should be ten times as many.—*1016 Patterson St., McKeesport, Pa.*

There should, there should. This is a nice dilemma you point out. The same idea had oc-

curred to me often, and is one of the reasons the story was chosen. It may turn out to be a real problem one day; on a smaller scale it is the reason why here on earth some men change nationalities and citizenships, and it is always a heartbreaking shattering decision to make. But it was a good story, particularly since it was invested with Leigh Brackett's special magic.

GEOLOGIC ABERRATION
by Gregg Calkins

Dear Sam: Many thanks for SLAN—now I know what those four golden strands are on my forehead. I've often wondered. They aren't too noticeable because my hair is blond anyhow, but they don't grow much and once when the barber almost cut one off it hurt like the dickens, so I always cut my hair myself, with a friends aid. I've never experienced telepathetic signals yet, but perhaps that's because I've never really listened or been in a position to get any. Thanks to your presentation of this story, maybe I can fulfill my destiny after all.

"We are living in a very temporary and abnormal interval . . ." says Mines after his admittedly very brief dip into Geology. How can it be abnormal when there is no normalcy? We are, it is true, right smack in the middle of the fourth interglacial period, supposedly waiting for the next glaciation. But, do these expanses of ice we have at our poles make it an abnormal situation or interval? Can you see how they would not be there by any standards, without doing away with the inclination of the earth's axis? And, you add, all we need is two degrees annual increase in temperature to melt these polar caps. True, but remember that the degrees are in Centigrade, not Fahrenheit, and that an equal swing the other way would put the fourth Ice Age right in our laps. Abnormal, he says, because we happen to be in the middle of two even greater abnormalities.

But, the most intriguing idea of all seems to be your idea of what you consider to be normality. Uniformity of temperature without extremes from north to south. Forget the geology for a second and try some astronomy—it ain't possible! No?

Back to the Summer FSM —Stars to Brackett for her tale, stripes to Gallun for his. Rest of the shorts readable, but no more. And, I sorta hope you didn't write that so-called editorial, Sam—mebbe Bix did it, eh? But, no, that would be unfair to *him*. I'm waiting for A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER now, so bye.—*761 Oakley St., Salt Lake City 16, Utah.*

Don't complicate things, Gregg, Bixby didn't write the editorial. Any blame you've got, you see it's delivered to the right place. But to settle your gripe about the "normal" period of earth, which displeases you, let's repeat: If the uniform temperature period lasts some 250,000,000 years and is then interrupted by an ice age which lasts about 30,000 years, after

[*Turn page*]

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which the earth goes right back to the uniform temperature period for another 250,000,000 years and this happens four times, aren't you justified in calling the uniform temperature period the "normal" condition? If you are in good health, but two or three times a year you come down with a cold which lasts a week, after which your body reverts to its previous cold-free condition, aren't you justified in calling good health your "normal" condition? Or are you normal only when you're sniffling? Leave us not split hairs—er—antennae.

NANCY'S SHARES
by Nancy Share

Dear Mr. Mines: Greetings again! This time I'm commenting on the Summer issue of FSM. Got a question to ask you, but first, I'll take a little time to tell you what I think of the selection of stories in this issue. *SLAN*: Now, I know why this is classified as a classic. I'm glad I was (am?) one of the people reading it for the first time. It's a classic classic. I was quite surprised to read such a good sf-f "emotional" story by van Vogt.

THE HOUSE ON THE VACANT LOT: (is this written by Rog Phillips' wife mari, or am I wrong??) This story could be called good . . . but not by me. The best thing I could say about it is . . . it was a fairly entertaining 5 minutes worth of reading.

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE: Holy Hannah! THIS is a story worthy of being printed???

SOMETHING BORROWED: Ahhh, I snorted with glee at this one. Hmmm, so the men of Mars are tall, broad-shouldered, with skin to match any dress . . . O, Mars here I come!

THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR: See what I mean about women being able to tear the reader's emotions apart with mere words? And it isn't just my feminine loyalty that prompts me to say this again either.

And . . . before I give you a chance to ask if it's because I hate men, NO! I think they're the prettiest things this side of Mars.

Now I come to the question I said I was going to ask you. Here it be:

"DID YOU GET YOUR EDITORIAL FOR THIS ISSUE OF *FSM* FROM A BOOK I AM PRESENTLY IN THE PROCESS OF DEVOURING?? THE BOOK IS ENTITLED: *BIOGRAPHY OF THE EARTH*, WRITTEN BY ONE MR. George Gamow."

Well?

Before I leave you, I must tell you that you are a highly intelligent editor because you picked Finlay to illustrate SLAN. Bless you, most honored of the current crop of awsome (is that word spelled wright, Mr. Mynes?) things known as editors.—*P.O. Box 31, Danville, Penna.*

P. S. Will you ever be able to print any of the SHE stories? I've never had the chance to read any of them, and I'd like to read at least the first book of the series.

Broke a rule and left your ratings of the stories in the ish intact. Reason: I thought they were funny. If nobody else sees the humor, sue me. Ahem, I did not lift the material for that editorial from the book you mention. Happened to be another book I lifted it from. Glad they agree though. Gives Mr. Oopsla Calkins something to gnaw his nails about. Drop in any time atall, Nancy.

THE OPPOSITION
by Don Allgeier

Dear Mr. Mines: I agree whole heartedly with Mr. Sam Moskowitz, whose letter appeared in the last issue. But in your comments on the letter you again reveal the closed mind which he criticized. You find it hard to understand his, or anyone else's viewpoint which differs from yours. And you have stated many times that you don't think much of a lot of the old stories. You think science fiction is better today than it was ten years ago. In fact, you seem to doubt if any of those old stories are really worth re-reading now, even though you publish some of them in your reprint mags.

You find it very strange that some of your letter writers actually want the really old stories. Well, I'm one of them too. I disagree with Sam somewhat on "Death of Iron," but I'm right in line in asking for stories from the Gernsback area—exclusively. I don't see why you need to print any new stories at all. The ones you use are pretty punk. Why not use your reprint mags for reprints and put the new stories in your magazines of new material? We can read new stories in magazine after magazine practically by the ton. But the old ones are not only collector's items; they represent something different, and thus a treat. I wish you'd delve more in to the files of the Gernsback era.

Some suggestions: "Electropolis," "Brood of Helios," "Outpost on the Moon," "Moon Conquerors," "Ark of the Covenant," "Revolt of the Scientists." Reprint "The Man Who Awoke" complete. And give us short stories by Juve, Vincent, Edwards, Hilliard, and other old-timers.

I'm afraid it's true—what Sam said: If you don't like it, print it because your readers will.—*1023 W. San Antonio Street, San Marcos, Texas.*

Okay, I heard you. That makes you and Sam and his cousin Jack a majority of three. If I've got a closed mind it's from reading so many old st—classics that it has given me a permanent loop to starboard. But don't think we're ignoring you and your cheering section, Don, perish forbid. We'll read the stories you suggest. Trust us to make a decision, or do you just want us to print them all without even reading them?

LONG REMEMBER
by J. K. Bach

Dear Sir: I have your summer edition of Fan-

tastic Stories, containing a reprint of SLAN by A. E. Van Vogt. Do you happen to know if Arthur Train's "Moon Maker" has been republished? It appeared in Cosmopolitan Magazine back in 1917, or some such, along with Robert W. Chambers' thrillers.

This was a remarkable story, as you may remember. Mr. Train had a collaborator who knew his scientific possibilities. Even at that early date, Uranium was to be used as fuel, and if my memory serves, the Peltier effect for cooling. If it hasn't been republished, you might be interested. —*Box 121 Canal St. Station, New York 13, New York.*

Have never heard of anyone republishing the Train story, though Sam Moskowitz might know. Will check and see if it is available, though as a rule it's not too easy to get reprint rights from a slick magazine.

PARLER DU DIABLE
by Jack Moskowitz

Dear Mr. Mines: I am writing this in regard to a letter published in the Spring 1952 issue of FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE by Sam Moskowitz of Newark. I agree with Sam 100%. The old stories are better than the new ones. Though I have been reading science fiction for a year or so, the old stories still appeal to me more than the new ones.

The original short stories in the latest FSM were better than average and far superior to the ones you have been using in the magazine up till now.

A Miss Lillian Carroll had a letter in CE which said, and I quote, "I can buy all the old second-hand magazines I want." I wonder if Miss Carroll has any idea at all how much she would have to pay for some of these "second-hand magazines" in a bookstore and thats if they have what she wants. I suppose she doesn't realize what a bargain she's getting when she buys FSM.

Since nobody knows Jack Vance I am wondering if he and Kuttner are one in the same person. They both live in California and nobody has ever seen Vance as far as I know.—*177 Shephard Avenue, Newark 8, New Jersey.*

Just when I thought I had Bill Tuning straightened out on that Kuttner-is-Vance madness you have to start it here! No, dag-nab it, Kuttner is not Vance. To repeat what I told Tuning, Kuttner is in California and Vance is in Europe. I had a letter from Kuttner there practically the same day I heard from Vance in Italy. Heck, their *styles* aren't the same at all. Doncha read the stories? Thanks for the assist with Miss Carroll.

THE INQUIRING REPORTER
by Dave Hammond

Dear Sam Mines: The Summer issue of FAN-

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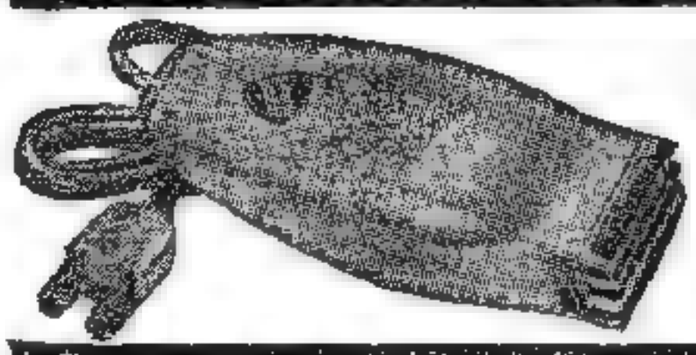

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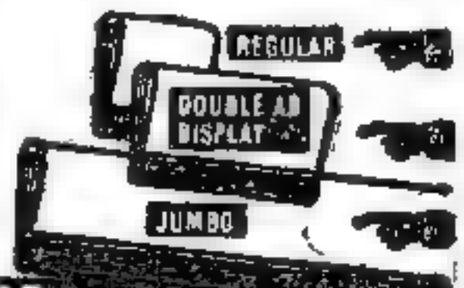

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TASTIC STORY QUARTERLY was really worthwhile. Like any science fiction fan who dares to call himself that I have read SLAN. When I do get around to re-reading it (again), though, I'll probably read it in the other form in which I have it. It isn't just that your version is probably cut; it is something else, something deeper.

Did you ever notice how the format of a magazine can effect your appreciation of its contents? The artwork can do it, the type face can do it. For example, a really exotic Finlay illo for what is apparently a fantasy story can send me right into it. Rogers has just about the same effect in another mag. Consider Amazing Stories. I've been reading that from the middle of '47, and, rather liking it. In the middle of '49, they changed printers, the paper became coarser, there were more typographical errors, and their type face changed. Then the stories dropped in quality (Or I became a little more mature) and the change was mixed with the type face. Now—Galaxy has that same type face, making it an effort for me to read the thing. I guess you'd call this a psychological conditioning.

The magazines you edit are well set up. Back in '50 or so, your mags were about ½" taller. The reduction in size was a good idea. It gave more of a feeling of—well—*delicacy* to the magazine.

As to this Hornstein character: how can he say that all the 25¢ magazines are equal in quality? Mines works hard to get the best authors, the best artists; Merwin has worked hard before him, introducing such names as de Camp, Leiber, and van Vogt to the readers. Yet, this person can compare all this work, this effort to magazine editors who seem to take things easy and leave all the writing in their magazines to house hacks! Really, Hornstein, where's your sense of proportion? It seems like these adolescents are all alike—and some people want to give the right to vote to eighteen year olds!

The best thing for me was Leigh Brackett's VEIL OF ASTELLAR. I never had a chance to get it in its first publication, but read it eagerly on second. It's a good story, well written. Brackett is quite an authoress. Just one word or mention of Jekkara or any other Martian city and I'm reading right away. When are we going to get another story like SEA KINGS OF MARS? STARMEN OF LLYRDIS was darned good, but what wouldn't I give to smell the sweet air blowing in from the Sea of Morning Opals on Venus or the dryness and evil of the Low-Canals of Mars? In place of a new novel, you might try reprinting SHADOW OVER MARS in FSM. True, it has been reprinted in England in pocket book form, but it hasn't been too widely distributed in America.

Speaking of reprints: Considering the attitudes of Street and Smith, how did you *ever* get reprint rights to SLAN? Remember all the trouble Galaxy had with NEEDLE? Come on, Mr. Mines, this sounds interesting. How did you get SLAN?

One further note. Your next FSM choice is A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER. I've read it (October '40 SS, wasn't it?) and it is a highly enjoyable story and appropriate for the lead spot. Bravo.—*Box 89, Runnemede, New Jersey.*

All this flattery could easily go to our head, but we'll resist. SHADOW OVER MARS will sure stand reprinting some day, but it's a little too recent, don't you think? How'd we get SLAN?

Pure genius, I guess.

STF MOVIES
by J. Cunningham

Dear Editor: I read, with considerable interest, your editorial in the Spring issue of Fantastic Story Magazine—and can vouch for its accuracy. It is possible many fans recall Science-Fiction movies which have been produced in European countries. Reasoning would have us believe the standard of quality used in these movies would indicate an equal quality of S-F stories. The prerequisite of a good Stf movie is threefold: 1. Scenery (lavish & high quality) 2. Plot (of mighty scope & distance) 3. Actors (leading character & extras well versed in the expression of feeling required to produce such a movie). Europe, with its cheap labor and cost of living, can accomplish more in meeting these requirements than the United States. Consequently—most movies of this type which emanate from Europe meet with approval of the greater number of Stf fans in the USA. In contrast—: USA movies of this nature lack lavish scenery (props, area of activity,) due to the high cost of such in the USA. The same is true of actors and the plot is usually "thin" to fit in with the limitations.

While France has no great "*fantasy writers*", *she does have* some great stories available in that language. It comes as no surprise, but a feeling of great satisfaction, to know that today many of the outstanding US & English science fiction stories are being reprinted in the French language so that the citizens there may enjoy this excellent field of entertainment. Printed in book form—these stories have proven an enormous success in France.

Your selections for reprint are desirable. . . . and outstanding. Desirable—because they fill a "gap" in both the "Library Collection," and reading needs of the greater majority of Stf readers. Outstanding—because they are the *very best* that has been written since the advent of enjoyable stf reading material

My sincerest thanks for a job well done. May FS continue to prosper and grow in distribution.—*Cocoa, Florida.*

Hollywood, despite its commercialism and inevitable corny melodrama, can do a superb technical job, as already evidenced by DESTINATION MOON, WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE and the superior DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. The current boom in science fiction should result in some very interesting technical achievements from Hollywood. With more money to spend than European producers they should be able to go all out on sets and props which are so important in stf movies.

I have heard there are currently 17 stories in the works at Hollywood.

MAD HANK
by Henry Moskowitz

Mines Dear Sam: Well, it seems that the good Lord has seen fit to fulfill one of my fondest wishes—to see a story by Mari Wolf in print. Lo, and here it is. And it was good, too. There was nothing new or original about it, but it was good, solid writing—something I would expect from Mrs. Roger P. Graham. You know who he is—Rog Phillips. That's news to you? Tsk, Sam, tsk! I remember Rog once saying, "Someday I hope to be known simply as the husband of Mari Wolf." Fat chance of that ever happening, huh? I hope you get enough mail commenting favorably on THE HOUSE ON THE VACANT LOT to warrant you buying many more of Mari's stories.

On beginning her story on page 92 and gazing at the picture on the opposite page, I was contented. After beginning the second page, I was mad. Here is part of the description of the girl in the story: . . . incredibly bony . . . short yellow tunic . . . thonged sandals . . . topheavy mask of thick purple eyeshadow and no lipstick . . . black hair cut in straight bangs across a too low forehead . . . hair piled on top of her head. Boy! Was I mad, for sure! This dame didn't look like the one in the illo. Of course, I must admit that I like Lawrence's babe better. Upon reading further, I found another girl entering the story, and . . . she seemed like the illo. Now I know what the illo represented. Everything is all straightened out now, Sam, so you can stop worrying.

Sure, I know that there are other stories, too. What's this? Another Mars story by Leigh Brackett (still waiting for her new novel, Son, but I can't hold myself back too much longer. If this keeps on, I'll have to come up to your office and read it there.) Ray Gallun's LUNAR PARASITES was very good. Gee! All these stories by Daniel Keyes floating 'round. Has he quit editing MSF? Was he fired? Or did the mag fold? Anyway, he has some good stories in the different magazines, and I hope to see more, too.

Sam, FSM has finally got itself a letter department. Before it was just a section with some letters, but now. Just compare with the first letter column. You are so right, the days of ease are over, for Moskowitz is here!

My comments in SS have brought me a small measure of fame, so I'll try it here, too. Hey, von Seibel *again*. Like a phantom, he keeps recurring. I think that I'm building up an immunity to him, though. If McNeil is interested in out-of-state fen, look me up. Allgeier, you and I see I to I. This does. I'm going to sub to Calkins's Oopsla; maybe then he'll stop writing. By the time this sees print (Sure it will. I'm blackmailing Sam), you'll have my buck, Gregg.

Well, Sam the Fan-Vet Convention was fun. It seems to this humble soul that a new definition of "fan" has arisen. Among other things, I see that you had more to say during the panel questioning period than all the others combined, but from you that was expected. In fact, I would have been disappointed if you had done otherwise. —*Three Bridges, N. J.*

Certainly the picture was of the beautiful gal.

[*Turn page*]

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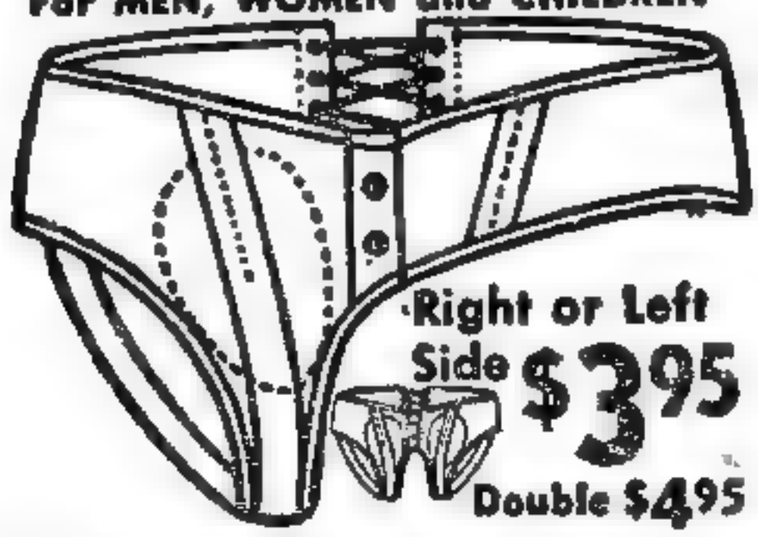

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You didn't think we'd waste Lawrence on the skinny one, did you? Daniel Keyes was not fired. Didn't you ever hear of an editor writing stories in his spare time? Were you at the Fan-Vet convention? Don't remember seeing you. Of course I was my usual modest, self-effacing self. Shouldn't be tongue-tied, I know, but I couldn't find a thing to say.

COLLECTOR'S ITEM
by Calvin Thos. Beck

Dear SaMines: First off, heaps of congrats to you, dear editor, for bringing SLAN once more into the fold. Though I read it twice in its former magazine form, followed by its book rendition, it was just as easy re-reading it over again as it was the first time. Doubtlessly this will make many a *fen* glee with joy considering the fabulous prices being asked for SLAN in mag. or book form. The average value is about $6.00 for the magazine version alone, with the book edition as high as $10.00. . . . Obviously the Summer '52 copy of F.S. will be a cherished collector's item in three or four years hence.

The supporting roster of stories, however, wasn't quite as prepossessing as have been most former issues. It would be far better to keep F.S. restricted to reprints. Sez I: reprints in reprint mags, and original stories in non-reprint mags. This is a subtle hint for ya' not to make another take-off as you recently did in a current issue of S. S. by putting old yarns in a mag. never known for reprints (referring to Williamson's DRAGON'S ISLAND).

I liked your little psychiatric dissertation, A PILL FOR DR. FREUD. More, if you please. Though it may not be tacked on the front door at Yale or Harvard, it's the sort of thing that provides food for thought. However, if I can add my two cents' worth, I would like to aver that I am afraid pills or any such form of so-called medical or psychiatric treatment may never be the answer to any mental problem.

Society and the white collar class as a majority are slowly undergoing strenuous mental exertions in everyday life. This common mental strain is the very thing from which so many of our psychotic or mental cases stem. By eliminating the very common root and cause of disturbance we will be able to conquer most of our mentally deranged cases, or cut a large percentage of potential psychopaths from our future lists.

The source of most of our mental cases is ENVIRONMENT. We may never gain Utopia but I can't see why it should be impossible to find a happy medium or quasi-Utopia.

Take New York City or Boston as an example of an "unhappy medium." Some four to five million people of the white collar or laboring class are up in the morning and at work by 8:30 or 9:00; eat a so-called lunch by 12 which alone could inspire the most soporific advertising man to classical displays on bicarb and ulcer ads; later experience the horror of packing themselves into odorous buses or subways for the homeward crush. Its sordid and nerve-wrecking.

What's the answer? Decentralization. Wash-

ington D. C. is, with all its imperfections, a better example of a city and its suburbs well laid out.

Don Martin: I agree with you regarding the alleged FORTEAN SOCIETY and Tiffany Thayer's capers. This messy aggregation has probably done more to hurt Fort's work than any other group could. Fort is great stuff without Thayer's mumbo-jumbo cultist ambitions.—*84-16 Elmhurst Ave., Elmhurst 73, L. I.*

Hardly a man now alive would disagree with you about the pernicious influence of overcrowding, or even of the mad pace of modern life. New York City is steadily losing population to the suburbs. But this does not solve the problem; in fact it makes it worse for the average commuter who has to rush even more to make that long ride twice a day. Decentralization will become a reality when a man's work is decentralized as much as his living quarters, so that he does not have to travel in to a central spot daily. Washington, though a gorgeous city, has terrible transportation problems, since its commuters all jam into buses and street cars and cabs, without even a subway to help.

Well, so much for sociology. See you all next time just two months from now.

—THE EDITOR.

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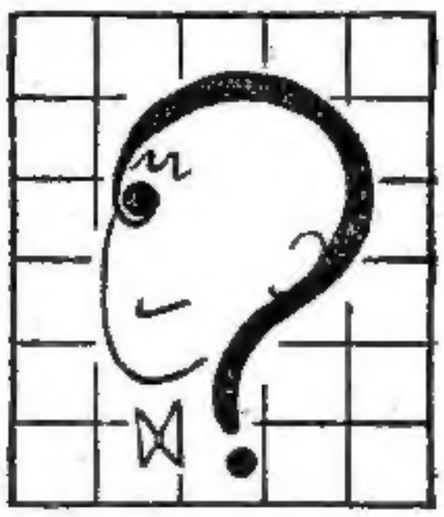

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